

The Diamond Grenade – A Series of Novellas.

Book I: A Father's Fate

At one point, on the banks of a confluence where two rivers ran together like closing thighs, there was a certain boatman. This boatman, name of Gur, had a fine long pole (not too bendy, not too strong) with which to move his long wide boat upon the water. Gur slept with his pole, lest it go missing. Then one evening while he was ferrying a few paying passengers from one put-in to the next, Gur's pole got stuck in thick river-bottom mud and muck and he lost his grip and the pole sank out of sight. Cursing, Gur leapt into the water and dove for the pole. Long minutes passed and Gur's nubile daughter Guri, at the prow of the boat, began to wail. Gur did not come back up. They found him later downstream. This is how the girl Guri became a very young boatman with a shoddy pole.

The thing about Guri is that she knew everybody. All the fares on her boat. They didn't necessarily know each other all too often, but everybody knew Guri. And somehow she knew everybody back. She just had a mind for it. Who went with whom and how the families fell out. Names. All the names Guri knew. But only one name made her sing: Tuc. Tuc drank and threw dice, but early in their acquaintance he'd made bold to say that Guri would make a good mother. This observation of Tuc's about Guri had won her over, so she sang his name in the dark. One syllable songs are short, but carry on the water.

Guri's favorite disgruntlement was that there was no word for girl boatman. It was poling-upriver hard to get more than a grunt out of half her older passengers, because they didn't see clear to it being right for her to be doing a man's job. Tuc suggested 'boatwoman', but Guri allowed as how that was more the busty mascot off the bow of a ship than a person who poled for a living. Tuc took to riding with Guri quite frequently. Then one night, he brought her a new pole, and it was a good pole.

Not long after the new pole, Tuc convinced Guri to elope with him a ways downriver to a town where he had prospects. When they got there, they traded the boat and pole for two goats. Guri was better with people than with animals, so Tuc tended the herd while she met and memorized every person she could find. Soon she had so much work taken in to do for folks that what with going to the big, clean houses to perform services inbetween times, and attending in good turn to the day's worth of all the waiting piecemeal work filling their modest house, Guri was too busy to make a baby.

Guri got fed up with being too busy to make a baby and made a baby. Tuc split. Guri's popularity made her fatherless child the ward of the town. Everybody parented him. That's why he grew up angry. His name was Gur, after his grandfather. Boy did he have a chip on his shoulder about being told what to do. Everybody told him when and where to jump. Only Guri could make him ask how high. Usually his answer would be jump why? The thing about having a whole village full of parents is that they are going to contradict each other and some of them are bound to be weird people.

Eventually, Gur decided the whole situation had gotten quite weird enough for his tastes, and he left town on foot as his father had. Difference being, Gur took only a book and a blanket, whereas Tuc had packed a bag. Guri hated to see Gur go, and hated that for all her labor she hadn't a proper gift to send him off with, so she hocked her jewels and bought him a set of sharpening stones. Two good things about honing blades for work. For one, there's always plenty of dull around. Secondly, there's rarely anybody standing there telling you what to do while you do it.

Men with hot tempers and chips on their shoulders and such would do better to steer clear of a profession involving weapons. The more Gur sharpened knives for a living, the more he wanted to use them on the

throats of half the people he met because of how they all sang the morning greeting to each other in the streets. He'd grown to detest the joie de vivre of the sparsely populated small towns he passed through. He needed the city. He needed to be in a throng.

In the city, he sharpened swords. Guri came to visit and brought a woman friend. They three ate well and took in a fire-and-water show. Guri urged her son to find a woman and make an heir to inherit his sword-sharpening earnings to date when he fell upon the next one he was to service. Gur asked his mother about Tuc. Tuc was in the city, and Gur knew about where. Guri made Gur take her there. Tuc ran when he realized who he was talking to, which was about five minutes after the mother and son engaged him in conversation in an eatery. At first, they just spoke about sport and games of chance. Then about sharpening, then about ferry boats, then Tuc twigged to who they were. Like I say, he ran, but Gur tripped him at the door. Guri and her friend roughed him up with a few pushes and kicks and all but spat in his face, and Gur let him know to steer clear or suffer the considerable wrath of the strapping, scrappy young man-about-town that Gur was. There was a threat to beat Tuc publicly. It was ugly. Then they let him flee. He'd been scrawny and flea-infested, they later agreed.

Guri decided she's outgrown smalltown workaday altogether and had Gur build her and her friend a villa adjacent his own. Turned out Gur simply lacked the whiles to win a woman of any caliber, so Guri resolved to win one for him. She brought such a parade of candidates to meet Gur that his social life began to interfere with his work. Guri soon had the city on a wire, knew just who to ask if you wanted to talk to who. Gur couldn't begin to keep up with all the dates he went on. All the candlelit dinners. Eventually they blurred into one long, somewhat less than lucid sleepwalk courtship. Guri saw him drowning and then suddenly gave him just one dinner companion. The one. Her pick. Night after night until there was no dinner without her, and her name was Honoria.

Gur and Honoria soon had Donus, Florian, and Beatus, all popular boy names Honoria blurted when they found themselves with a litter of three. They had been told to expect at least two. Gur and Honoria let Guri raise the boys while they both worked. Demand for their services rose steadily. She cleaned house of course. Everybody cleaned house for the people in the clean houses. Guri always had cleaned, but now she hired and assigned cleaners. Her network was unparalleled.

Guri's friend told them once when she'd been drinking how Tuc had told Guri she should be a madame in a proper brothel. Guri could have, too, could have run a show like that. If she hadn't misgivings about the propriety of the product on offer being offered at all. She shied away from that end of things and she and her friend eventually wound up churchly. Thus it was that the triplets Donus, Florian, and Beatus, were raised in a church and spoke Latin when none of their neighbors did.

The boys spoke their own language. They thought it fun to berate and defame everybody around them all unawares in this patois of various etymology. They knew more ways to belittle people with their made-up words than there are numbers to count. And no one understood a word that they said, so they got away with it. No one was given quarter in the boys' scorn save the clergy, from whom they'd learned Latin - the backbone of their own little infernal language. When they were on a roll of hurling their insults at Gur, the speaking often took on a cadence, becoming akin to a singsong or chant. As it turned out, people loved to hear this singsong nonsense of insults, and soon the three brothers had an income of their own. They became minstrels. Guri and her friend stopped going to church once her grandchildren gained local fame. Gur shook his head and inwardly wondered whether his sons hadn't gotten the whole idea from him somehow. Honoria danced and danced and danced and danced.

Moving right along, there came a time for the boys to think about falling into a looser formation and taking on other company. The company of ladies. They solemnly vowed to honor each other above all women until they found three sisters. Trips for trips. Everybody thought they were bananas, but they made it happen. Well, close enough. There was a set of sisters roughly their age group in that city. There were and they found them. Take it or leave it just as you will. And that's the whole roll call for now – Dead Gur, Guris, Gur, Honoria, the boys and their wives. Oddly, considering their trade was singing insults, Donus nor Florian nor Beatus ever made fun of his or each other's wives. And the wives were well in Guri's hand from the start. Gur grumbled that there were too many cooks over the pot, but he was doted on and liked that. Everybody agreed that Honoria had ought to stop cleaning houses, so she did.

Tuc came around once and Gur beat him up in the dooryard. Tuc collapsed and Gur went to fetch a sword. Guri shouldered the father of her son and lugged him around the corner of the street, then went to deter Gur while Donus, Florian, and Beatus saw to it that Tuc made it out of the city. Gur roared that nobody ever let him do anything that he wanted to do. The three wives placated him with fruit and lies.

Donus, Florian, and Beatus began to travel to festivals to perform. Bazaars and barter meetings. Their entertainment was known far and wide to be ticklish and catchy. And with some effort, they found that they could actually sing a bit and pick up instruments. And – another hidden talent -- their mother Honoria could choreograph a line of dancers. Guri drummed up girls for Honoria to traipse out for high kicks behind her sons, much to the three wives' dismay. There were indiscretions and there was a form of six way simultaneous legal and holy sundering, after which the sisters packed bags and lit out. Gur and Honoria admonished the boys to leave off having relations with the dancers, but the temptation continued to overrule what passed for their discipline. Guri said she might as well become a madame after all, as a consequence of which harsh words, Gur would not thereafter allow any of the dancers on his property.

But the boys were on tour and Gur was working still -- less, but still – and had just gotten a contract to service enlisted men's swords, which was a big damned deal, while Guri continued to bring in a tidy stream of currency by arranging who would clean which house, picking up people and putting them down, as she had been doing in one way or another her whole life. There was no shortage of hands ready to clean, and a veritable plenty of clean houses to maintain. Getting the right hands to each task was a logistical, strategical, communications nightmare suited for just such a mind as Guri's. To her, it was not a nightmare. It was second-nature.

Honoria took to traveling with her sons and eventually ran off with a soldier. Gur was sure he had put an edge on the perfidious soldier's service issue sword, and as for the infidel, his better half, he hardly missed her. He missed the three wives, was who he missed. When Donus, Florian, and Beatus returned to the city, Gur implored them to remarry. "Impossible," was their unanimous reply.

One of the clean house owners was murdered, and suspicious, inquisitive government worrywarts fell upon Guri's network like hyena on day-old kill. Every cleaner was a likely suspect until alibied. Guri was half-accused of masterminding a clash of the classes by a tradesheet gossip – always taken with a grain of salt, but a swayer of public opinion all the same. She let out one whooping gut laugh when she heard the allegations and said by god I should. Arrange some murders. And then Donus, Florian, and Beatus couldn't help but insult all officials and indeed authority itself roundly in song. Several housepets, recently acquired by Gur, reacted to the brothers' improvisations. An owl ducked repeatedly. A cat relocated to the garden, and two dogs barked.

Guri asked Gur, why all the pets all of a sudden? Were they going to get livestock next? Gur demurred. Guri said well she would not abide goats. Gur ceded the matter. Who was to feed the pets and tend to their functions if Guri and her friend and Gur were to travel with the boys as planned for the summer? Gur muttered about taking one day and one challenge at a time. He was just not forward-looking. Guri had the property pet-free within the fortnight. Except for the owl, which she would cock her head at now and then when lost in thought.

Summer unfolded and off they went, town to town in the entourage of their insult-singing progeny. Accommodations were usually not lavish, but nor were they commonly mean. They slept in inns most often. And in one such inn, the summer half gone, the family found working behind the stoves three sisters of the age of Donus, Florian, and Beatus.

Kismet being such that significant convergences are not to be ignored, there was another ceremony, and there were three new wives. Gur had to give a tour of his holdings to the three sisters' uncle. This was not enjoyable for Gur, but the uncle's spirits were buoyant, bubbly even, as they ran down a short list of residences Gur had come to own. His own estate, though relatively humble, was of considerable value, and he had accumulated a few sheaves of more complicated financial securities over the years. Actually, he had basically taken a lot of bets on how the city might evolve in the foreseeable future. His portfolio was his index of associations, his rogue's locker of connections, above and below board, in the city. The uncle pored over it intently and rolled grapes around in his cheeks like marbles. Yet his only real question before taking his leave was about holdings abroad, of which Gur could honestly report nil.

The last minstrel gig of the summer was in the middle of a desert. Fortunately, it was to be hosted at an oasis. Guri just fretted that the cess might be mishandled, what with so many people in attendance. How many visitors could an oasis village entertain? She put her ear to the ground and by the time they arrived at the oasis, she had introductions lined up for them with everybody and his brother.

Tent city. Revelry as revenue. Misplaced bargain- and thrill-seekers milling along midways of dubious splendor. From anybody who has something to sell right up the whole spectrum of merchandising, service, and penny performance all the way up to the tightrope acrobats. The only people who weren't involved in the festive commerce were some nomads whose arrival at the oasis was unrelated to the otherwise all-consuming function, its venues and events. Gur approached the nomads straightaway and offered to hone their weapons, which led to him being absent for the entirety of the performance schedule of which Donus, Florian, and Beatus were a part. Gur was simply busy sharpening steel as usual. Guri and her friend found their element easily and became involved with the coordination of labor in the direction of maintaining proper sanitation. Pretty soon Guri wrote the work schedules. Everyone asked her where to go when and do what.

At length, Gur was exonerated from the droll company of the nomads. They had scrutinized his every stroke of steel against stone, making him feel quite like a child rehearsing his memorization for a whole pack of unimpressed fathers at once. Shaking off this somewhat familiar petulance, he sought out his sons at their afterparty and contributed due congratulations and accolades. Biggest show yet and a grand audience response. They were definitely going places. Guri had news for them all. She had insinuated herself into the power structure of the whole circus scene so far as to see how to make a life for them on the road. She had met the head honchos while simultaneously making herself indispensable to the prevailing men and mavens of the whole, loosely confederated conglomeration of travelling folk camped out around the circus. Not only would the triplets draw their own crowds now, but she, her friend and Gur would be employed too in various capacities. Gur was to do maintenance on the tents, his task menial

yet essential and unsupervised enough to satisfy his sensitivities. They would live in two wagons, he, Guri's friend and she, with Donus, Florian, Beatus and their wives ensconced in well-appointed showtent quarters.

Guri's wagon was a bed with wheels. Gur's wagon was a workshop with a cot. Harvest was upon them, and before they had much time to acclimate to the new mode of living, they were hopping from community to community across the map. Never the same show twice. Donus, Florian, and Beatus managed to incomprehensibly insult each sitting of faces afresh. And their material never seemed to grow stale among themselves. They genuinely cracked each other up, and the effect was infectious. Their wives sat in the crowd and laughed long and loud. It was their little in-joke. In private, they seemed never to be very amused.

Of all the opportunities to squander funds in the great shakedown of the travelling show, Gur's favorites were the freaks of nature. Often he lamented half-heartedly that his sons had not been born conjoined. He also liked the outrageous offerings. Not the lewdest of them, but the least believable, certainly, drew him in. Every once in a while when the mood struck him, he would even pay entry to the man-fish, who was clearly not a man-fish. God knows what Gur fed on, attending such shows.

Inevitably, Guri found Gur a mate. She was a mere ticket-taker, Guri told him, and twice the age of the rest. Gur bridled at this description until he conversed with the woman long enough to perceive some of her more remarkable features. Not only did she have a good head on her shoulders, a way with people, and good hair, she was also the niece of the ringmaster and owner of the circus – the largest single operation in the whole sprawling traveling affair.

So it was that Gur found himself detailing his holdings and involvements to a very shrewd man in very improbable regalia. Despite himself, Gur admired and even liked the ringmaster. And the ringmaster, who went by many names but introduced himself to Gur as Alex, well he liked Gur okay too. The nuptials were a low-fanfare but well-attended event during which Gur vowed in sickness and in health to honor and cherish the woman under the veil, and she – the ringmaster's niece – Colia – she vowed to do the same for him. After the ceremony, Gur and Colia sojourned to the city, where he showed her his estate and handful of residences. Duly impressed, she then felt better about the next leg of their honeymoon, which took them to the houses and manses of her people. The ringmaster Alex lived in dust on the road, but retreated to luxury. His brother, Colia's father, had his fingers in many a pie being spun on many a pole. This man, Anato, had made much of Gur at the wedding, and maintained in their encounters this spirit of pride in his new son-in-law. Gur felt gratified. Other than a slight shrill edge to the clamor for grandchildren, the honeymoon was winning. They returned to the festival circuit well-fed and rosy-cheeked. Their first night back, Gur took Colia to the man-fish.

Something about being a man-fish gave the man-fish a form of blurry precognition. Given an article belonging to a given spectator, he might well know what would befall them. Standing half-submersed in his tank, his torso gleaming, the man-fish fingered the scarf of Gur's new wife. "She will never leave you," the man-fish told Gur, "but you will never fully have her." Colia cried out objection, but the damage was done. From that night forward, Gur was haunted by the knowledge that he did not have his wife. She would never fully be his. But the dismay this aroused in him was well counterbalanced by the relief he took in the certainty that she would never leave him. They did not visit the man-fish together again.

Donus, Florian, and Beatus made hay while the harvest sun shone upon them, and they prospered. Word of their talent spread across invisible divides into the big clean houses, and they began to be invited to

perform at private occasions. These engagements pulled them away from the travelling show. Soon the travelling show lost its allure for Gur and even Guri. Before the snows -- with the blessings of the ringmaster Alex and Anato -- Gur, Colia, and Guri returned to the city.

Colia's child, born without incident a year later, was a girl. Anrea, the darling, do-know-wrong latecomer grandchild, Anrea inherited Guri's disdain for popular opinion concerning a woman's place and fitting social roles. This propensity to buck tradition formed a volatile admixture with her father's temper. She grew up willful and brave, quick to heat and determined to see things through. Her education was lengthy and comprehensive. Matriculating directly into an appointed official position, she proceeded to make her political mark, becoming now, in the fullness of time, the city's only female magistrate.

This is where I come in. I am not the great great grandson of Gur the boatman. No blood relation to Guri or Colia or Anrea, yet this is my family. I am their foundling. Anrea discovered me outside a public library. I was but one year of age. She took me for her own, and so I belong and do not belong in the lineage I have thus far detailed, the details of which come to me from the very horses' mouths, and which I have fixed for myself here as a point of departure from which to pole on along my own route, stop by stop.

I must stop first to pick up my uncles, Donus, Florian, and Beatus. I have secured an invitation to one of their lower profile private performances. How does one tell them apart? Well, they are not identical. Florian is easy because he is the loudest and has the longest hair. Donus is the tallest and the likeliest to let out an actual recognizable curse along with his lines of inveigled invective. Beatus, then, is the shortest, with the shortest hair, and has the signature laugh; there are people everywhere doing Beatus' laugh, which sounds like two raucous birds having at each other.

At the show, I occupy a big clean house for the first time. Despite impeccable grooming, I feel as though I am leaving smudges of inferiority everywhere. The staff of the house see right through me. But then my uncles are there and all proceeds swimmingly as they entertain. Most of the privileged youth dance. I dance. Florian lays his head back on his own shoulder and lets out a loud drone while thumping his neck with his index finger. Most everybody laughs. I laugh. Beatus laughs. Everybody Beatus-laughs.

Donus is the one who likes to drive the cart or wagon or buggy. He will steer one-handed with his arm around whoever happens to be sitting beside him. I was sitting beside him. The back of the wagon had benches, on which the other two brothers were faced off. The squeaking was intolerable.

"Why does your wagon squeak so much?" I asked loudly enough for all to hear.

"Ran out of cheese!" hollered Donus in my ear. And from the back came two replies:

"Because it can't groan no more!"

"We've sprung a squeak!"

In that absurdly ungainly, unsightly wagon, we arrived at a home of my grandfather, Anato. The valet was in stitches. The brothers took turns insulting him in a lingo no one can understand, then we went in.

"I know those tones of voice!" bellowed Anato.

The brothers gave him a bit of a show. He clapped along and then waved his hands in the air.

"If I knew what you just said, I'd likely kill you all dead!"

To which sentiment the brothers merrily agreed, suggesting methods by which they were to be executed:

“Dunk me!”

“Buuuuurn me!”

“Natural causes me.”

And I said:

“They danced. They actually danced. All those people. I mean I danced, but... I laughed, but... how can it be that I am the only one who finds it off-putting to be so openly mocked and degraded? I mean, you can hear the contempt can't you? That's for you. And they mean it, I think. To each other they do.”

“Oh, we mean it to you too,” said Beatus.

“Yes, they do!” came Anato's bellow.

“How is that acceptable? Let alone... danceable?”

Florian made a move as if he might burst into song or thump his neck or both, and I recoiled.

Anato did a passable Beatus-laugh. “Do it, do it,” he begged Beatus.

I did mine. It was awful. My sour note rang down the hall and at far doors, servers scuffled in.

“Messiah,” said Beatus.

Anato led us to the table, where we went soup to nuts.

“Thank you Grandfather for this lovely gustation,” I ventured.

The brothers piped up:

“We're not really your uncles you know.”

“Delectable!”

“We're not?”

“Shan't I call you Uncle anymore?” I asked earnestly (ever my weakness).

“Don't call me a name-calling hypocrite, you name-calling hypocrite!”

“Call us flush with cash. Anato where can we put all these boxes of money?”

“Yeah Anato, we're flush. Help us stash.”

“You,” said Anato, “may use the vault.”

As we entered the vault, I felt my self-confidence rise as my expertise kicked in. I knew what these files of documents meant. Could read each and explain them to others.

“But Grandfather, how do you know,” I asked, picking up the first sheet of paper that came to hand, “that this library will expand and need all this work?”

“Ah,” said Anato, “My associates and I shall persuade certain parties to favor expansion.”

“Libraries don’t really need basements. Especially ones that you have to tear down the whole existing construct to build.”

“Gonna be a lot of men on that job,” shrugged Anato.

“With a lot of hands in the pockets of each of them,” I countered.

The three brothers weighed in:

“Library basements make better meeting halls than Sunday School classrooms.”

“Why don’t we pull a publicity stunt and go entertain the workmen somewhere.”

“Yeah!”

“I could set that up for you,” I said.

“Brilliant!” beamed Anato. “You will organize a show for your uncles. Truly you are one of us.”

“I’m thinking more of a demonstration,” I said.

Beatus laughed.

“There it is!” beamed Anato.

“We can call into question the need for the project, and demonstrate to send the workers home.”

“Bit... cross-purposed, though, wouldn’t that be?” wondered Anato aloud.

I let it go.

The brothers had the wagon drawn up and then I learned why it squeaked so much. It was full of money! The floor to the benches was the top of a bed which was laid in with bundles of cash. Anato laughed and laughed. A two-day counting and sorting commenced. All tallied, storage ensued, and my uncles’ money became a corner of a pile of currency which dwarfed me.

“What if you were to distribute the contents of this vault to a neighborhood of people?”

My uncles:

“That’s where we’re livin!”

“Anato. Watch this one.”

Beatus just gestured with his hand that he had his eye on me.

“Well then...” mused Anato, “...then that neighborhood of people would not work.”

“There’s be no one to dig the library basement,” I offered.

“Lotta jobs, that job,” mused Anato. “And that’s just a maybe-job. Why you pick this deal of all deals. You were born in a library you know.”

“No, I wasn’t. Or at least, nobody knows if I was.”

"You know what I mean. Now, you contact whoever you need to to get your uncles going on this demonstration show, and don't be shy to drop my name."

"I won't be shy, Grandfather."

"One more, Beatus!"

Beatus laughed.

I knew that in order to pull off a grand-scale performance of my uncles, I'd need all the help Guri would give me. Others could help, but not like her. She would just pick names out of the air and scribble them on cards of introduction for me. I'd have a recipe box of errands to run, acquaintances to make, promotions to engage. So she was the next stop.

"Can't help you, kid," said Guri, "Gur's in on that library project as well."

"The old library is insect-infested," said Gur.

"But can't you just point me in the right direction?"

"Ask your mother. Ask Anrea."

"They eat the wood!" Gur said.

Next stop, home.

Mom:

"You want to foil a project your whole family stands to gain by."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Oh you know who you'll need for this?"

"Who?"

"Besides your uncles of course."

"Of course."

"Tuc."

"Tuc?!"

"Yes, Tuc. He knows every back porch and secret meadow workers' coalition there is."

"But Tuc is... ostracized."

"Yes and so will you be if you're known to have dealt with him, so be discrete, kid."

"Gur would murder Tuc."

"And you."

“No.”

Mom and I laughed.

“Okay so are there any others I should speak with? Politicians? Bosses? The workers themselves...”

“Talk to them all.”

“I see.”

Next stop, Tuc.

I made contact in public but nowhere bustling. A few people moved on the green expanse of the park, but no one was within earshot.

“I want to help the workers.”

“Don’t we all.”

“At the very least, they will get a free live show.”

“Yeah and at the worst, they’ll be out of work.”

“But they don’t want to work, do they? They don’t like it.”

“Well nobody really... it’s a rare guy who really wants... listen, you just work. You have to.”

“To earn money.”

“To eat.”

“I can improve on that...mere... biological imperative. Life is more than working to eat. There is room for improvement in this system. I can make it better.”

“With a minstrel show?”

“You just get me the support of the workers, and leave the rest to me.”

“Support for what?”

“Well, for my uncles, to begin.”

“Donus, Florian, and Beatus...”

“For a free show from them. Soon.”

“And?”

“And I may speak after the performance.”

“You may, mightn’t you?”

“And I may make some... distributions.”

“Of what?”

“Let’s just say, contributions.”

“You don’t get how many workers there are.”

“Well, this will just be the start.”

“What about my distributions?”

“Will this do?”

“For starters.”

“Fine.”

Let me lean on my pole a moment here and say that I’m not naïve. This project isn’t going to make or break anyone I know. Anato doesn’t care, not a whit, not really, and Gur won’t miss a beat, either, if this deal doesn’t come together.

I decided to go see the library.

It was quaint.

In the reading rooms, I quizzed the librarians. How needful were the new building and basement?

Not at all, they invariably replied.

Were there insects in the woodwork?

None at all.

I ventured to a meeting of a few dozen workers with Tuc.

What I found was a court. With peasants, courtiers, a king, and other nobility in attendance.

It was a good thing I came bringing gifts.

“You bet we’ll have a show!” Noc, the king, was very certain of himself.

I wondered how my uncles would comport themselves in this room.

I had not known there was such station and place among the workers. Everybody knew to whom to defer and when to speak and what to say. The king was the boss of course, then these unexpected dukes and duchesses of the set. They had one-syllable and two-syllable names, but they were quite manifestly the duke of this and the duchess of that. They represented other whole groups. Those who were accompanying others to the meeting – we visitors - were the peasants. I was with Tuc. Who wasn’t the same station as anyone else in the room. Tuc. He appeared to be along the lines of an advisor to the king. That’s where he stood, over the left-hand shoulder of Noc.

When Noc pronounced that the show with my uncles was on, the rest of the room uproared. Mostly happily. I said hooray, just to be saying something, since everybody else was saying something.

Tuc winked at me and did a Beatus-laugh.

The meeting-room became a birdfight. Everyone Beatus-laughed.

“We’ll dance!” declared Noc.

I realized I’d have to invite the uncles’ second wives. They’d fit right in with the other courtiers.

“Will there be speeches?” This from a duke.

“Aye!” avowed Noc.

“Aye,” I said.

Everybody looked at me and laughed.

“Aye,” said the duke who’d raised the question.

Everyone said aye.

“Well,” yelled Tuc, “now that we’ve voted...”

Everyone laughed.

“... who all gets to, ah, orate?” and Tuc laughed alone. Everybody else got thoughtful.

“Donus, Florian, Beatus, Noc...” Noc listed.

“...Lev,...” I ventured.

No one spoke.

“Lev son of Anrea,” I corrected myself.

There was quick muttered support and agreement.

“Lev before Noc?” asked Noc.

“Just as Noc wishes,” I replied.

“Noc first,” said Tuc.

“Noc first says Tuc son of...” said a courtier.

“Mud,” said another.

I couldn’t but laugh.

“Lev first, then Donus, Florian, and Beatus, then Noc,” said Tuc.

“Oh,” we all said, realizing I would introduce my uncles.

“What am I to say?” asked Noc. “Why isn’t Anrea speaking?”

“She may,” I told the king of the room, “if we want.”

“Ooh,” said Noc.

“If Anrea speaks, many will want to speak,” said one duchess.

“If Anrea speaks, I will speak,” said another.

“Forever,” said Tuc, to smattered laughter.

“Very well,” said Noc, clapping his hands together, “When, where, how much, then who.”

“How much is easy,” I said. “No charge to attend, some money to be given away.”

“How much for a chance at the money?” asked Noc.

“Given, I say. Given away.”

“Well by whom to whom man?” Noc was flabbergasted.

“I’ll handle it,” I declared.

There was a silence and I knew what it meant. Only the king made declarations here.

“We’ll have to let Lev handle the money,” said Tuc.

“Not MY money,” laughed Noc.

“Would you like to be paid to speak?” I asked Noc.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Okay,” I said.

“I would like to be paid to speak,” said the duchess who favored Anrea.

“Okay,” I said.

“I would like to be paid to speak,” said a courtier.

Tuc did a Beatus-laugh.

“I will,” said a duke.

“Okay,” I said.

“How much?” the duke asked me.

“Same as others get,” I told him.

“Same as Noc?” asked the king.

“Yes,” I said. “And same as many others who do not speak.”

I could tell Tuc wanted to know what he was getting. So could Noc.

“What does Tuc get?” asked a peasant. She was accompanying a courtier.

“Same as you,” I said to the peasant.

“Wow,” she said.

“And same as me, and I should like to spend mine on taking you to dinner and a show.”

“Okay,” she said.

Tuc applauded. Others clapped too.

“Aw,” said the king, “a match made in meetin.”

Tuc took my arm and asked me if he was getting only enough compensation for a dinner and a show.

“Someplace fancy,” I said.

“Noc will speak for dinner money!” said Noc.

“So will I,” said my peasant.

“Okay,” I said.

“Hey,” said the courtier who’d offered before.

“Okay, you too,” I said.

Noc laughed.

“Noc first,” said Tuc.

“Noc first,” I agreed.

“What should I say?” asked Noc again.

“Tell them...” began the duchess who was to speak.

“Tell dirty jokes, Noc.” Said a duke.

“My uncles will handle that,” I said.

Here is what Noc actually said at the rally, after I had introduced the main event and then Anrea had followed up briefly with a sort of public service announcement laying out the fact that the library basement project was basically unnecessary but would generate lots of needful positions labor-wise, Noc said:

“Well, we need the work. But do we need TO work, THIS hard? For JUST ENOUGH?”

Anrea came back onto stage and shook his hand.

“Speaking of JUST ENOUGH,” rang Anrea’s great speaking-voice, “my son Lev has something for us.”

That’s when I started handing out the money.

With the help of a crew of a score or more cronies, mostly just my close friends, I handed out one full squeaky wagon worth of bundles of cash. Everyone was amused to finally find out why I had parked the squeaky wagon stageside.

The was no riot, thank God, though I swear I saw Tuc fleeing Gur, Gur holding two bundles of cash, and Tuc juggling three. Asked about this later, Gur allowed as how he had been holding his wife's share, and Tuc had not gotten away. No details of the beating that followed, except that his daughter Anrea had gotten a good lick in.

Orchestrated by Guri, a force composed of Gur's wife Colia and the three second wives of Donus, Florian, and Beatus, infiltrated the anti-labor movement with admirable swiftness. Those women knew people, and any organization is just made of people. Pretty soon, I learned that Guri and her friend, old ladies, were sitting with Noc. I tried to be invited to one of these head-to-heads, to come abreast of the schemes of what I thought of as a pack of mighty underdogs. My mother secured us an audience by bringing also her grandfather Anatos. I remember that day. I was to learn that none of them (except maybe Guri) were mighty underdogs after all.

Anatos: "Noc!"

Noc: "Anrea! Anatos!"

Guri: "How are you, Lev?"

Me: "Honored to be invited, Great Grandmother."

Anrea: "Guri, we brought you some bread."

Noc: "Noc brought wine."

Anatos: "As did Anatos."

Noc: "Anatos!"

Anatos: "Noc!"

Noc: "Anatos, you have been creating jobs forever."

Anatos: "And Noc has been my go-to staffer more than once!"

Anrea: "Couple of movers and shakers here, Guri."

Guri: "I've created a few jobs and staffed them in my day."

Me: "But what about what you said at the rally, Noc, about not needing TO work?"

Anrea: "Lev honey, that was Noc's version of what Donus, Florian, and Beatus do. He was insulting our intelligences."

Noc: "Aye!"

Guri: "Aw, Lev thought it was for real."

Me: "Well, there is an anti-labor movement!"

Guri: "Yes, child, but Noc's not in it."

Me: "Well, who is, then?"

Anrea: "Tuc."

Me: "Well, what about what you said, Mother?"

Anrea: "Do you remember what I said?"

Me: "Just the whole picture."

Anrea: "Bunch of stuff everybody already knew."

Guri laughed.

Guri: "I liked what your girlfriend said, Lev. She said we were an amazing family."

Noc: "Yeah, it was like a toast."

Guri: "The woman who liked Anrea so well spoke after my own heart."

Anrea: "Aw."

Anatos: "The pro-women woman?"

Guri's friend: "Aye."

Anatos: "Oh, right. She said women workers are under men workers in the big, clean houses."

Me: "That's true. I've seen that."

Guri: "What does your girl do, Lev?"

Me: "I'm sure you know more about her than I do by now, Guri."

Anatos: "Should men clean more?"

Noc: "Probably."

Guri: "No. Then what would we do?"

Me: "Manage?"

Anrea: "Your usual workaday girl can't manage herself."

Noc: "Well, that is true."

Anatos: "Neither can your usual construction grunt."

Me: "Maybe the women should manage the construction."

Noc: "There are a few who do."

Me: "Right, but usually..."

Guri: "Your grunts wish they could be managed by my Colia or some other beauty."

There was laughter.

Noc: "Imperious beauty! Tell me what to do!"

Me: "Is the anti-labor movement all made up of Tucs?"

Anrea: "No."

Guri: "There are many who know that there is more than enough money to go around."

Me: "My startling realization, before the whole rally idea, was that just my little stack in Anatos' vault would go pretty far in small parcels. Imagine how far the whole vault would go, all the vaults!"

Anatos: "Lot of dinners. Lot of shows. Dear Lev. Lot of room for you to use in the vault if you ever have any money again."

Me: "Well, I got Dana out of it."

Noc: "Small price to pay."

Guri: "Oh it is Dana, that's right. Yes, she cleans."

Me: "Sure she cleans."

Guri: "Her brothers are construction grunts."

Me: "All five."

Anatos: "Five! Look at all the muscle Lev can muster now! You should have them fix up one of my barns!"

Me: "Okay."

Noc: "Dana will approve."

Anrea: "No one will trouble you when your girlfriend has five big brothers."

Guri: "Safe as houses."

Anrea and Guri were right: nobody gave Dana and me a hard time. We could go anywhere. We could eat with the workers. And I even took her to a gala at a house among houses, and we fared well there.

Me: "Maybe there should be more women managers in the workforce."

Dana: "Not a job I'd want, personally."

Me: "I would not like to be a woman manager either."

Dana: "I like to know what needs to be done, to do it, and be done with it."

Me: "My great grandmother was a boat woman."

Dana: "What is a boat woman?"

Me: "A ferry boat driver."

Dana: "With a pole?"

Me: "Yes."

Dana: "Guri?"

Me: "Yes."

Dana: "Wow. Way back then. Where?"

Me: "Up in the valleys where the rivers meet."

Dana: "Does she still have people there?"

Me: "Guri has people everywhere."

Dana: "Let's take her back there: back to her homeplace."

Me: "Okay."

Guri, when approached about a pilgrimage to her homeplace, was unenthusiastic.

"Sure, I'll go," she said.

"God," said her friend.

"You'll come too," said Guri.

"God," said her friend.

Once we got close enough to where she was raised, there was no transportation but ferryboat.

"These little boats are uncomfortable," said Dana, on our third or fourth hop by boat.

"Try poling," said Guri's friend.

Guri gave her friend a kiss, and the other passengers in the boat were mortified. Except me and perhaps Dana. I had warned her. The boatman just about dropped his pole.

"Hang onto that," Guri told the boatman.

"Aye," said the boatman.

It turned out Guri had been raised in a cave. From one unremarkable put-in for the ferry, she marched us up a valley road until it became steep, then off a side track to a cliff with three houses backed up against the rock. The middle house was hers. The front door opened into a garage-like big room, the back wall of which was a cavemouth.

"Old Gur slept there," she told us, pointing at a firepit just within the cave.

"And you, Guri," asked Dana, "where did you sleep?"

Guri lead us past the firepit through an opening into a large chamber in the rock. There was no firepit there, but rather a small but deep pool of clear, cold water.

“Don’t drink that,” Guri’s friend cautioned me, as I bent to splash my face.

“Why not?” asked Guri.

“God,” said Guri’s friend.

“Look,” said Dana, “Your blankets are still here.”

“No,” said Guri, “I had only furs.”

“That sounds nice,” I said.

Guri smiled.

“Are you here to buy the house?” It was a small boy, standing at the opening of the cave chamber.

“Yes,” I said.

“You don’t have any money left,” said Guri’s friend.

“Yes?” asked Dana.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’ll get Papa.” And the boy left.

“Why, will you live here?” Guri asked me.

“No,” said Dana.

“Only sometimes,” I said.

“God,” said Guri’s friend.

“I made enough money off of your brothers doing up the barn to buy this house,” I said.

“Oh,” said Dana.

Guri laughed. “You took a nice cut!” she said.

The boy came back pulling a man by the hand.

“You want it?” asked the man.

“Yes.” I said.

Which brings us roughly up to the present. Guri and her friend and Dana stayed a night, then returned to the city. I stayed here to write. Took a week to get the paper shipped in. Gur saw to it. And Gur sent along a book: the book he had taken with him when he left his boyhood home for the city. Gur’s book was the story of a boy who killed his father.

I have invited Tuc by letter to visit me here.

Drinking the pool water has not seemed to affect me ill as yet. There is a latrine for all three houses. My neighbors have bigger caves in theirs, and more house in front. We eat fish and rice. For exercise, I lift and move the large stone I use for a desk. In the morning, I move it near the pool. At noon, to the front yard. At dinner, to the firepit. It is heavy. My back grows stronger here.

Dana comes to read what I have written. She is bemused by my dozens of pages. She reads Gur's book in the front yard while I work. Tuc arrives.

Me: "Tuc."

Tuc puts down his bag, throws up his arms, and does a Beatus-laugh.

Dana: "Is this who I think it is?"

Tuc: "I come bearing gifts."

Me: "I'm glad you came alone."

Dana: "I'm walking down to the put-in to tell the boatman something."

Dana left, and Tuc took her place on a blanket. He picked up Gur's book.

Tuc: "What's this about?"

Me: "An untimely death."

Tuc: "Seen a few of them. What about what you're writing? What's it about?"

Me: "It's memoir."

Tuc: "It's what?"

Me: "It's about me."

Tuc: "So when's our next rally?"

Me: "Our next rally will be for women managers."

Tuc: "That's what our last rally was for. That organizer Jirith stole the show."

Me: "Our last rally was to prevent the building of the new library."

Tuc: "But they're building it."

Me: "You win some, you lose some."

Tuc: "So now we go to Jirith?"

Me: "Yeah."

Tuc: "What about Noc?"

Me: "We'll need him later."

Tuc: "Jirith is a woman of convictions. She will not be false."

Me: "Noc was false."

Tuc: "He said what we wanted him to say."

Dana returned.

"My brothers will be here in the next few days," she said.

"What? Well then I am inviting my uncles."

"That's fine," said Dana.

"I'd better just stay tonight," said Tuc.

"Not at all," said Dana. "You'll stay the week."

"We're going to need more fish, more rice," I fretted.

"My brothers are bringing bread, fruit, and meat," said Dana.

I produced a fresh sheet of paper upon which to compose a letter to Donus, Florian, and Beatus, and spread it upon my stone desk.

"Dear uncles," I said and wrote.

"Tell them to bring wine and nuts," suggested Dana.

"Tell them to bring their wives," suggested Tuc.

"Please bring dancing girls to shack up with in cave-house," I wrote. "Come soonest with also wine and nuts. Bring cash to buy cave-house and coin to pay boatmen."

"We will buy the neighbors' houses," I said.

"Perfect!" exclaimed Dana.

"But we don't want to leave," said my neighbor, who had been standing there God knows how long.

"Just for a week," I said.

"Oh, okay," he said.

Tuc: "Donus, Florian, and Beatus are coming!"

"No shit?" asked my neighbor.

Tuc: "No shit."

"Don't tell anyone, but Tuc is here," I wrote, "and we are planning our next rally."

Dana: "Tuc, you will sleep by the fire."

"We will rally for the women workers," I wrote, "with Anrea and Jirith speaking again."

Tuc surrendered the blanket to Dana and came to read over my shoulder. He chortled.

"What's so funny?" asked Dana.

"Please bring dancing girls," read Tuc out loud.

Dana laughed.

"They will, too," I said.

"Where am I going to be all week now?" asked my neighbor.

"In the nearest inn," I told him.

"What if I just drop in to make sure everything is going well?" he asked.

"Please do," I replied.

"What if I bring a few people?" he asked.

"Bring extra dancing girls," I wrote.

Tuc snickered.

"Bring girls for my brothers," said Dana.

"Okay," said my neighbor.

"I have five brothers," said Dana.

"Okay," said my neighbor.

My other neighbor, the one with the largest house and cave, came out then. He readily accepted the plan. His children, he said, would need their own room at the inn, so it would cost double to transplant him. Tuc assured him money was not an issue.

"Will there be a show?" asked my other neighbor.

"There always is," I replied.

"Is it okay for kids?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Sure it is," said Dana.

"I just don't think it's good for them to learn that tone," I said.

"That tone' is the spirit of rebellion," said Dana, "and who knows rebellion better than the youth?"

"Yes, if you want your children to be rebellious," I told my other neighbor, "by all means bring them."

"Oh they are little rebels already," he said.

"See?" said Dana.

"When do you need us out by?" asked my neighbor.

"Three days," said Dana.

"I'll write letters to the innkeeper, to Jirith and to... what was her name?"

Dana: "Who?"

Tuc: "Helia."

Me: "Helia, yes. The courtier."

Dana: "What is a courtier?"

Me: "The other woman who spoke at the library rally."

Dana: "Yes, but what is a courtier?"

Tuc: "Let the man write."

Dana: "Bite me, Tuc."

Me: "At Noc's meeting, dearest. Noc was like a king holding court. There were nobles and courtiers. You and I were peasants, Dana."

Tuc: "What was I?"

Dana: "I am a peasant."

"So are we all," said my other neighbor.

"Aye," said my neighbor.

"Aye," said I.

Dana: "So the people in the big, clean houses... they are... kings and queens and..."

"No," I said. "They are gods."

Tuc: "Gods..."

"No, they're not," said my neighbor.

"Yes, they are," said my other neighbor.

"We will hold the next rally at a big, clean house," I said.

"Are you sure?" asked Dana.

"Don't worry," I said. "No gods or goddesses will be there. Just the staff of the estate."

"Which house?" asked Dana.

"One that's run by women," I explained.

Tuc: "How in the hell are you going to get this place to ourselves?"

"My mother knows a few goddesses," I smiled.

Tuc: "Will she come? Will Gur?"

"Not this time," I assured him. "We've got to keep you alive."

Tuc: "What about Guri and Yuni?"

"Who is Yuni?" asked Dana.

I laughed.

"Guri's friend, dear."

"Oh. You know, I never caught her name."

Tuc: "Yuni comes from a big, clean house."

"She does?!" Dana was amazed.

"Her mother did," I explained, "but her father did not."

"What did her father do?" asked Dana.

"Horses," I said.

"You should ask Yuni to speak," said Dana.

Tuc: "If Guri and Yuni come, I'd better not stay long."

"You wouldn't want to leave before the grand finale," I said.

Tuc: "Money?"

Me: "Aye."

Dana: "What money?"

Me: "The estate I have in mind: it has a vault."

Dana: "So?"

Me: "It is quite a vault."

Dana: "So?"

Tuc: "Vaults are not easy to open unless you know how."

Me: "I know how."

Dana: "We can't just open a vault and give away the money."

Me: "I know."

Dana: "So..."

Me: "The head of house and I will open it, and the butlers and maids will distribute the money."

Dana: "Why would they do that?"

Me: "We'll have permission."

Dana: "From a god?"

I laughed.

"Yes."

I rose and moved my desk to the firepit. We ate. Then

Tuc hummed himself to sleep at the firepit, keeping Dana and me awake where we lay by the pool.

“How much money,” asked Dana?

“Same as last time,” I whispered.

“What will you write to Jirith and Helia?”

“Invitations to orate,” I answered.

“What will they say?”

“Tuc only knows,” I replied.

“I don’t trust him.”

“I know.”

The next three mornings, I moved my desk to the front yard and wrote. The letter to the innkeeper was easy. My uncles would foot the bill. As I composed the other two letters, Tuc hovered over my shoulder with suggestions. He wanted Jirith and Helia to rage against male leadership. I wrote for them to advocate gender equality.

On the fourth morning, Dana’s brothers arrived and my neighbors left.

“I’ll be back in two days for dinner,” enthused my neighbor, “with five girls from town.”

“Those are for you assholes,” Dana said to her brothers.

“Messiah,” said the oldest brother, who was married.

“The dancing girls should be here any day,” said Tuc, rubbing his palms together.

“How many children do you have, Tuc?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Tuc responded.

“So you are Gur’s father?” asked one of Dana’s brothers.

“He is,” I replied.

“But not old Gur the boatman, Guri’s father who used to live here,” explained Dana.

“Guri’s man?”

“Briefly,” said Tuc.

“What happened to old Gur?” asked a brother.

“He died while working,” Dana said. “Tell them, dear.”

So I fished out this manuscript and read the beginning to the brothers. They seemed to enjoy the story.

“Live by the pole, die by the pole,” said one of them when I stopped reading.

“This is how the girl Guri became a very young boatman with a shoddy pole.” Said another. This being the last line I’d read.

“A girl with a pole,” said Dana. “How symbolic.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you, Dana:” I said, “you see the deeper meaning.”

“What deeper meaning?” asked Tuc.

“A girl with a pole!” said one of Dana’s younger brothers.

“Exactly,” I said.

“What is the deeper meaning of old Gur dying trying to save his pole?” asked the youngest brother.

“What man wouldn’t?” asked an older brother.

“I gave her a pole,” said Tuc.

“I guess you did!” said Dana.

“Where did you get the pole you gave her?” I asked Tuc.

“Won it. At dice.”

Dana’s oldest brother produced a set of dice.

Dana’s brothers and Tuc and I were shooting dice in the dining cave of the largest house when my uncles arrived days later. Dana showed them in. She had played some at first, but her luck had been poor and her tolerance for the rhyming narration of the games by Tuc thin. Tuc had a name for every combination of the dice, and a rhyme or three for every name. He sounded like one of my uncles as he crooned to the dice, and it struck me that some of their talent had come from him.

“Hey now, little seven from heaven, come nearer unto me...” That’s what he was saying when my uncles walked up.

“What is this,” asked Donus, “a prayer meeting?”

“Yes, they’ve been praying for days,” Dana said sarcastically.

“Seven!” exclaimed Tuc, who had rolled the dice.

“Have you paid the innkeeper?” I asked my uncles. “Where are all the girls?”

“We don’t do the dancing girls anymore,” said Florian in a morose tone of voice.

“Yes, we stopped by the inn,” said Beatus.

Dana’s five brothers rose and stood in file from eldest to youngest as Dana introduced them to my uncles.

“We met a couple of the women that the neighbor is bringing for you lot,” said Beatus.

“They were goers,” said Donus.

“Speaking of going,” said Florian, “is that latrine outside the only hole around?”

“Yes,” said Dana.

“Hey,” said Beatus to Dana’s elder brother, “If we get some lumber up here, think you boys could build a proper privy?”

“In a day,” said Dana’s brother.

“Done,” said Donus.

“Damn,” I said, “you hired them directly.”

“Yeah,” said Dana, “where’s Lev’s cut?”

“Lev now owns all he surveys,” said Tuc.

“For a week,” I said.

“No,” said Tuc.

“How did you know that, Tuc?” asked Florian.

“Just made sense,” said Tuc.

“Yes,” said Donus, “your neighbors are not coming back.”

“And it’s all in my name?” I asked.

“Lev’s compound,” said Beatus.

“Lev’s cliff?” asked Dana.

“Well, Lev’s three house-caves,” said Florian. “No one seems to own the cliff.”

“Some god owns it,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Florian.

“What?” said Donus.

“Haha some god,” said Beatus. “Landowners are like gods aren’t they.”

“Yes they are,” said Dana.

Soon we all went for a swim in the river nearby, then ate a lavish meal. That afternoon, the five brothers got to work clearing the site for the privy, and I showed my letters to Jirith and Helia to my uncles.

“We’ll just do instrumental,” said Florian.

“Wow,” I said. “Why?”

“Too many powerful women in the picture,” said Donus.

“We don’t like to rag on the ladies,” said Beatus.

“Well,” I said, “you could rag on the male managers.”

"Oh, I see," said Florian.

"Oh, okay," said Donus.

"That we can do," said Beatus.

"Like, you could think about how my mom is the only female magistrate and rag about that."

"Well," said Florian, "you know we usually do whoever's in front of us."

"Yeah," said Donus, "we rag AT people, not ABOUT people."

"Maybe you could try something new," said Dana.

"Maybe," said Beatus.

The next day, lots of lumber arrived, as did several trunks of my uncles' possessions, including some of their instruments. They played for Dana and me while we swam, which was delightful. Their mode of playing was whimsical and sardonic. "Isn't it all so very curious?" their music seemed to ask.

"Your music makes me feel that life is absurd," I told Beatus.

The day after that, the three second wives arrived, along with a pack of children.

"Are all these your kids?" I asked Donus.

"No, some of them are theirs," said Donus, meaning the wives'.

"They're all ours," said the Donus' wife.

"We'll need more houses," said Florian's wife.

She was right. The five brothers occupied the largest cave-house, and Tuc the smallest. Dana and I had room in the middle cave-house for the children, but there was nowhere for my uncles and their wives to set up. Donus, Florian, and Beatus had bunked with Dana and me before the wives and kids had arrived.

"A bigtop will do," said Florian.

That night, my uncles and their wives and kids stayed at an inn. The next day, they returned in a fifty-foot boat with canvas and poles and a crew of three hands to erect and service the massive tent.

"We had to buy the meadow up the way," said Donus.

"You found the lord of the land?" I asked.

"Yes," said Donus.

"Did you buy the cliff too?" I asked.

"No," said Donus.

"Is the meadow in my name?"

"You wish!" said Beatus.

"How much land do you three own?" I asked.

"This is the first," said Florian.

"Now you are gods!" cried Dana.

"A tent is hard to keep clean," said Florian.

"You will have a ways to walk to the privy," said Dana's elder brother.

The privy was monumental. It was a house unto itself. It had rooms with one hole and rooms with two.

"Why did you build rooms with two holes," Tuc asked the brothers.

"For parents with young children," said Dana.

"For true love-birds," said Beatus.

"Won't you use a two-holer with me?" I asked Dana.

"Is that a proposal?" she countered.

"Fair enough," I said.

My uncles and their wives and kids cheered.

"Looks like we're staying longer than a week," said Florian's wife.

"We'll need another tent," said Dana's elder brother, "for our family, when they come."

"Yes. No problem," said Florian.

"And one for Guri and company," I said.

"Right," said Donus.

Tuc left that night, after taking a substantial stack of cash from my uncles in dice.

"That... matrem... irrumabo... sure can throw the bones," said Beatus.

"Fututor Madris..." mused Florian.

"Materfututrix?" asked Donus.

"Matrem fututorem odi," I said.

"Everybody does," said Beatus.

"Everybody does what?" asked Dana.

"Hates the motherfucker," said Beatus.

"Tuc?" asked Dana's youngest brother.

"Aye," I said.

"Yes, Tuc, irrumabo te!" said Beatus.

"How much did he win off of you all?" Dana asked.

“Enough to buy his own tent,” said one of Dana’s brothers.

“Oh, he won’t be here for the...” said Dana, then blushed loud red and strode from the crowd into our cave-house.

“For the ceremony!” I said.

There was cheering. Florian and Donus took up instruments. Beatus sang a to-be-wed tune of sorts, berating me for my unworthiness of Dana and my dubious life-choices, from what I could discern.

“Perhaps we could invite a male manager to the women workers’ rally to sit and be roasted,” I said later.

“THAT’s what we need,” said Donus.

“How do we find one?” I asked.

“Noc will do it,” said Dana.

“Of course. Noc.” I said, hugging my fiancé.

The days passed. I wrote to my family and to Noc, as well as corresponding with Tuc.

“You are a powerful man,” Beatus complimented me one day, as he watched me handle my letters.

“You really think so?” I asked, floored by his remark.

“You are,” agreed Florian.

“Yes,” said Donus.

“You are powerful men,” I echoed back at them. For once, I had said the right thing. They just nodded.

“What says Noc?” Donus asked.

“Noc is in.”

“How about Anrea?” asked Beatus.

“Anrea is in.”

“Who is to be our... deity?” asked Florian.

I told him the name of the privileged landowner on whose estate the rally was to be held, and who had agreed to bestow a sizeable chunk of cash upon the proceedings.

“How in the hell did you swing that?” asked Florian.

“She wants me to marry her daughter.”

“But by that time, you will be wed to Dana!”

“They won’t know that.”

So it was that we had a hush-hush little wedding, Dana and me. All witnesses pledged, as a part of the ceremony, to keep our union a secret. Guri went first, and her pledge was beautiful. Gur followed, and his

was an oath. Gur's wife and the second wives of my uncles and their kids and all of Dana's kin present took turns saying, "I'll never tell." Then Dana and I read our vows and said, "I do."

"Your vows were lovely, Lev," my mother told me.

"Weren't they?" said Dana, hugging my arm.

"Yours too, dear," Anrea said to her new daughter-in-law. "And we have much to discuss."

"Yes, come to our tent now, Dana," said Guri. And Guri and Yuni and Anrea and Colia led my bride away. Dana's mother and her only sister followed along. As did my uncles' wives.

"You're a man now, Lev," said Gur.

"Bring a sword to the rally, Grandfather," I said back.

"Will do," he said without missing a beat.

"Now, now," said Anato, who was only there for the afternoon, and had brought his brother Alex the ringmaster, their wives, and a few others. They, too, had said "I'll never tell."

"Colia won't mind if I end Tuc," said Gur.

"Yes she will, and you know it," said Anato.

"Mother will too," I said.

"I'll do it," said Dana's father.

"He's mine," said Gur.

"Our own Oedipus!" said Beatus.

"That reminds me to return this," I said, producing Gur's book from beneath a pile of Tuc's letters.

"What's all that?" asked Gur, noticing Tuc's writing.

"Last words of a doomed man," I replied.

"Damned right," said Gur.

"Let me do it," said Dana's father. "I've been in jail before."

"Let me," said Dana's youngest brother.

"Why would you?" I asked.

"To protect Papa," he said.

"I see," I said.

"They won't throw me in jail," said Gur.

"Why not?" asked Anato.

"We'll think on that," said Alex the ringmaster.

“Spoken like a man who’s had men killed before,” said Donus.

“Aye,” said Alex.

“Anrea will know,” Florian said. “She won’t stand by and let a man be framed and murdered.”

“How would she know it was a frame?” asked Alex.

“She’ll know,” said Beatus.

“I’ll handle my daughter,” said Gur.

“I heard she poked him in the gizzard last time,” said Anatos.

“That she did,” said Gur.

“Well, I wouldn’t do it on that piece of land,” said Anatos.

“Why not?” asked Gur.

“Best to kill him at an inn. That happens all the time,” said Alex.

“There are inns nearby,” I said.

“Drunken brawl ends badly,” said Alex. “But why would you have a sword?”

“True,” said Gur. “It’s not as if I carry one.”

“You can be sharpening the cutlery of the inn,” I said.

“And protecting the inn from Tuc,” said Alex.

“So Tuc is robbing the inn,” I said.

“It will be robbed and Tuc fingered,” said Alex.

“But who…” I began.

“Leave it to me,” said Alex.

“Brother, what have you against this man?” asked Anatos.

“He has a hand in organizing my workers,” said Alex. “Now they all want tents of their own.”

“Where do they sleep now?” I asked.

“They share tents now,” said Alex.

“Maybe they should have their own tents,” said Anatos.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So hold them a rally,” said Alex. “Do you want the man dead or not?”

“Aye,” said Gur.

“Then leave it to me.”

After the ringmaster and Anatos said farewell at the put-in, my uncles again played instruments while we all swam. The women were delightful, and the men played with the kids.

"How long can you stay," I asked Guri.

"There is much to be done," she replied. "You must carry Dana over the threshold of a city villa."

"But I have no city villa," I protested.

"You have a house," said Gur.

"We have a house?" asked Dana.

Colia gave an address and Dana squealed.

"Finally!" said Anrea.

"We will still come here so that you can write," Dana reassured me.

"We'll be here off and on too," said Florian's wife.

"God," said Yuni. She had her own room in the privy, where no one else was allowed.

"Come on Yuni, get in," said Guri as she swam.

"If I must," said Yuni. She gracefully descended the riverbank and swam out to Guri.

"Yuni," I prodded gently, "you did not grow up by the water. Yet you swim well."

"We had lakes," she said.

"We had lakes'," mocked Guri and dunked her friend.

"Do you still have lakes?" Dana asked.

"Not I!" said Yuni, and dunked Guri back.

"I wonder who owns this river," someone said.

"Yuni's grandfather god," said someone else.

"No way."

"Who knows?"

Some of my uncles' children began chattering about owning land.

"No one really owns it," one said.

"They just think they do," said another.

"Look what you are raising my grandchildren to believe," said Gur.

"Why have you taken no land?" Donus asked Gur.

"I own a farm," said Gur.

"The fields and all?" asked Donus.

"No," said Gur.

"I didn't know we had a farm, Father," said Florian.

"WE don't, I do," said Gur.

"Party at the farm!" said Beatus.

"Better food for the farm hands!" I said.

"Those men eat like kings," said Gur.

"Better bunks, then!"

"They don't want better bunks."

"They do, they just don't know it yet."

So it was set that after the women workers' rally, there would be a farm hands' rally.

"In what stuff will you invest?" Donus asked me shortly before leading his family back to the city.

"I have no capital," I replied.

"Yes, you do," said Florian.

"We packed the squeaky wagon for you," said Beatus.

"My God," I said. "Where is it?"

"Gur's villa," said Donus.

"Well," I thought out loud, "why don't I buy tents to sell to Alex's circus workers and Grandfather's farm hands?"

"Hmm..." said Dana.

"You have some money, too, Dana." Dana's mother was leaving that day, too. She'd stayed on a while after the rest of her family had departed.

"Oh Mother, I do?"

"You can afford a few tents. A dozen nice ones, maybe."

"Where can we buy nice tents?" I asked.

"I know a guy who makes them," said Gur.

"We know just the guy," said Colia.

"Oh of course you do, you two gypsies," said Dana.

"I really am a gypsy, you know," said Colia.

“And a gypsy can never be fully owned by a man,” said Gur.

“You stop with that man-fish nonsense,” said Colia.

“Tis true,” said Gur.

“Messiah,” said Colia.

They left the next day, Gur and Colia. Guri and Yuni too.

“We have a lot of room now,” said Dana.

“We should do something about that, or the place will become dilapidated,” said Anrea.

The three of us contacted the five townswomen my neighbor had brought to the wedding. They agreed to take over the three cave-houses and the privy, which they would share with the crew who stayed in my uncles’ tents in the meadow. I wondered whether the next time I stayed here, it would be full of women. Worse things could happen.

We returned to the city and Dana and I moved into the house Gur and Colia had given us. Anrea insisted on my removing every single personal effect from her premises. I lobbied to maintain a room. For my library at least. She did not relent. Dana was understanding as I lined wall after wall of our new home with books. She herself had few belongings. She brought a machine for making blankets, and a kit of cleaning tools and supplies. I told her she would not need to work. She was thrilled.

I rented warehouse space and filled it with one-, two-, and three-man tents. After the squeaky wagon was divested of cash, I stored that there, too, as my house had garage nor yard.

“We are in up to our necks in this tent business,” I said. “We had best get on with it.”

But the women workers’ rally came first.

In a brilliant moment, my wife and I realized at the same time that we could rent tents to those attending the rally. That we did, and made quite a tent city of the rolling lawns of the generous goddess.

There was a stage and an amphitheater, and my uncles’ and mother’s fame filled it.

Noc came and sat on a throne centerstage and Donus, Florian, and Beatus let him have it.

“I am the male manager,” was Noc’s only line, which he delivered to me as I showed him to his throne.

After the rhythmical roast, I helped him down and off stage right and we began to prepare the money giveaway. Meanwhile, at the nearby inn where Tuc was lodged, there was a robbery. Gur was absent from the rally. Anato was at the rally, and cheered when his granddaughter took the stage.

Anrea described the current state of labor management. She gave Guri’s cleaning service as an example of female management. She invited Guri to the stage, and Guri accepted. In strident tones, Guri related how she had been treated over the years. She had been shown some respect, and she had been disrespected. She indignantly told the story of the tradesheet gossip who had accused her of fomenting class conflict. Yuni and my uncles’ sisters led the laughter of the audience.

“And now,” proceeded Guri, pointing out the irony, “here I am doing just that!”

Anrea and Guri gave the stage to Helia, who was to introduce Jirith.

Helia told about working under men in the big, clean houses.

Jirith spoke about the men who ran construction.

There were a few other speakers, all women, one of whom started up a chant: "More women managers!"

Before the chant died down, I took the opportunity to commence distribution of the money.

As we were doling out the parcels of cash, I spotted Tuc in the crowd. He shrank from me as I approached, and looked frantically about himself for potential attackers.

"You haven't seen me," he said. "I'm not here."

"Don't worry," I told him, "Gur is not here. And Guri and Yuni have already left to boat on the lake."

Even as I spoke, Anrea and Colia were descending upon Tuc. They shouldered their way through the crowd in our direction.

"I'm out!" said Tuc.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

Tuc named his inn, and I urged him to go there and wait for me to arrive.

That was the last I ever saw of Tuc. Gur slew him with a carving knife and huge, two-tined fork. Tuc's body was found, along with a small fortune in cash. The authorities congratulated Gur on dispatching the thief who had robbed the inn. Gur was given reward money by the innkeeper, and the authorities went so far as to hang a small medal around his neck.

"I'll never take it off," Gur said of his medal. And, thenceforth, he rarely ever did.

"Who will we sacrifice at our next rally?" asked Beatus.

The rally for better accommodations for workers came off without a hitch. Dana and I sold every tent we had to farm owners for their hands, and established a business of further tent distribution through us from the tent-maker. At the rally, Alex the ringmaster announced that his workers would bunk four-to-a-tent instead of in great wards like orphans as before. He made the first order of tents through Dana and me: fifty four-man tents. We shook hands on stage to much rejoicing of circus workers and farm hands. Next, I introduced Donus, Florian, and Beatus, who sat Gur in a chair and held him as a scapegoat farmer. Their musical abuse of their father whipped the attendees into a frenzy of dance and laughter, after which we gave away some cash provided by the landowner in whose field our festivities were held. The landowner's youngest son was there, a friend of mine who had secured me invitations to many big, clean houses over the years. I stayed near him. I had chosen to wear a long knife on my belt, with which to defend his life if need be. He asked when I would be ready to publish.

"I am ready," I said.

BOOK II – A Country Reborn

Author's Word

All honor to my patron and accolades to his publishers. Special thanks to my wife. Thanks, too, to the boatmen and common people of the confluence, where I found the peace to pen the words of the book to which this is the sequel. Heartfelt apologies to my grandfather, whose medal and monetary reward were retracted upon that book being widely read, and who now faces charges of patricide in the first degree. Further humble apologies to Alex the ringmaster and those among his circle who likewise face charges. Had I foreseen the forensic use of my words, I would have kept them to myself. A certain daughter of a certain personage to whom I was practically betrothed despite being already wed has narrowly prevented the removal of my head. It is to her I dedicate this work. May it instigate less misery.

Chapter One

Anrea spoke eloquently at Gur's trial, in vain as it happened, for the judicial panel there found Tuc innocent of any crime justifying being flayed to death with carving tools. Gur was imprisoned pending execution. The noose, they said, within the year. So primitive.

Alex and his henchmen were found guilty of lesser crimes and sentenced to various stretches of jail-time.

Jails and prisons are interesting institutions.

I have acquired the blueprints to both Gur's prison and Alex's jail.

Guri and Colia have befriended the wives of wardens and guards and inmates.

The prison-break will require a diversion. That's where my uncles come in. The death-row cellblock is not invited to the performance, but we know the death-row guards and have bought the warden's silence.

What of the repercussions of this damning confession meeting, like my last, with publication? All going according to plan, by then the revolution will be in full-swing. Let the dice fall as they may.

What revolution? Well, we have arranged breaks at every prison and jail in the land. Strategic assaults on the vaults of hundreds of landowners will immediately follow the breaks, with the freed prisoners leading the fray. The money from the vaults will buy the allegiance of the masses, who will overthrow their local governments while my family assails the central bureaucracy. By her own hand, Anrea will poison many. With her help, we will kill many more. Gur proposes to garrote the head of state in his bed.

Armies will meet us, but armies are made of people, and Guri has already the people's ear. The numbers of the privileged who will be capable of doing battle will be manageable, once the people's army matures.

My patron and others will be spared. As many will be spared as possible. But heads will roll. Dana and I are investing in small, portable guillotines. Gur oversees their production.

Guri says that the anti-labor movement is the key to our success. She has armed them already.

Here in the caves, I have been working on a bomb. The boatmen are aware. They are on the payroll.

The anti-labor leadership will orchestrate the conscription of forces from every village and town, to march on the capitol once each local government falls.

All is to commence as soon as my bomb is ready.

Chapter Two

I write now in the rubble of the capitol. The bloodthirst of the people is nearly slaked, and they look up from their kills with red-running jowls to me and to my family. What shall we tell them?

The crucial difficulty in these early days of a new system is delegation of authority.

Somehow, we must protect the remaining landowners from further harm, without turning their estates into fortresses. Our solution thus far has been to hide the previously privileged; we must let them out at some point. My patron and many others languish at my cave-house. I must make away there post haste.

We spend our days here as a court. Anrea is the queen, I her prince. We receive news and tribute, and knight people left and right. Anrea has more knights than any Arthur, and she moves them about the country deftly. She does not call them knights, of course, except to me. She calls them deputies.

Anato and Noc are more than deputies. Each of them is a lord of lords. Anato speaks on behalf of the surviving managerial class, and Noc is at the top of the pyramid of former workers. Both are impatient to convert swords back into plowshares.

Guri and Gur and Colia are here. Gur has had his day, has held his bloody garrote above his head before a cheering throng, and Colia has taken it from him and put it under glass.

Guri is the new administration. Her cabinet occupies what's left of the capitol. If Anrea is the queen, Guri is the president. I would have imagined their roles reversed. But it is Guri who has harnessed the women's movement. And it is the women who will stop the civil war.

As we speak, the militant anti-labor movement is being disbanded by the women. Oh, it is men who exercise the mortal force to take into custody those who will not cease bloodshed, but it is women who decide who to kill, who to keep, and who to send to Anrea to be acknowledged and perhaps deputized.

The deputies will form local governments. This is what Guri and Anrea have told me.

Our single greatest fear is foreign invasion.

Chapter Three

Months have passed and the dreaded foreign combatants have not arrived. No one considers our own foreign conquest except the most idealistic and the most short-sighted of the former anti-labor ilk. The idealists would liberate the workers of neighboring states, and the short-sighted relish the spoils of plunder. None of them will hold sway. My patron and I will see to that.

Dana and I are on the lookout for a new product. Tents are still in demand, but the guillotine business has fallen off. Haha.

The farms never stopped running, and the infrastructure held firm.

At last, we are a democracy again, my family no longer holding court.

Anrea has convened a high court, and Guri a congress wherein Anatos and Noc lead debate.

For some reason, the people want Gur for head of state, which lets me off the hook.

I am become our minister of foreign policy, my patron my indispensable advisor. International trade is a gnarl of obligation to signatures at the bottoms of impossible documents too numerous to be housed in one vault. This sovereignty will trade with us only if we eschew that sovereignty. Another state threatens boycott if our purchases from them fall below a certain mark. I am invited to countless courts, and I decline to appear in any. Many delegations arrive unbidden and must be received.

One day, as I am moving my desk from the firepit to the front yard, a man appears on the track leading past the cave-houses.

"Permission to approach!" calls the man.

"Are you armed?" I call back.

"Not with a stone as great as yours!"

I place my desk and, fleet of foot, fetch a blade from my house.

"I come in peace!" calls the man.

"Leave your weapons in the lane!"

The man removes a breastplate and unbuckles a curious belt on which hang certain hard leather pouches.

"What is in your pouches?" I call to him.

"Firearms!" he calls back. "In my holsters!"

I am alone at the caves, but the meadow tents are populated with my patron and our wives and friends.

"Permission to approach!" calls the man again.

"Granted!" I reply.

As is my habit, I go on with my work, not stopping to sit formally with my visitor.

After a few minutes of standing silently nearby as I prepare my pen and begin to write, he asks if he may use the privy. I nod consent, and he mounts the stair into the ridiculously large shithouse.

As soon as he closes the door behind him, I run to his shed weaponry and grab it up and run on to the meadow, where I drop the breastplate and holstered belt on the dinnertable in the bigtop. My friends draw round as I unfasten one holster and produce a crude little pistol.

"Messiah," mutters my patron.

"Permission to enter the tent!" calls the man from outside.

"Granted!" I call back.

"I know how to use this," I lie, as the man enters.

"Or soon will," he rejoins.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I am... a fan.”

“I have fans?”

“You do.”

“My uncles have fans. I have family and friends and people who want something from me.”

The man does a flute-throated, foreign version of the Beatus-laugh.

“Where are you from?” asks my patron.

“I was born,” says the man, “not far abroad. But I have traveled the world.”

“Whom do you serve?” asks my patron.

“I am here to serve Lev.”

“I have no servants,” I say.

“Then I shall lead your fan-club,” says the man.

“Petition first to join, ronin,” says my patron.

“How are you called?” I ask.

“My liege, I am Tim,” he answers.

“I am not your liege and never will be, Tim the Ronin,” I say.

“And how are you called?” Tim asks my patron. “Are you Dekus?”

“I am.”

“And are these...” and the man proceeds to name nearly all of my friends present.

“Dammit, Tim,” says my patron.

“I,” says Tim, “am a friend of many a boatman.”

A few of my friends remark upon having seen Tim in boats.

“My great great grandfather was a boatman,” I say.

“I thought you were found at a library,” says Tim.

“By you?” I ask.

Tim laughs.

“One knows better than to admit to being a neglectful father in your family.”

Dekus let loose a string of words in one foreign language, then another.

Tim responds in kind.

One of my friends, Trito, even more of a polyglot than Dekus, pronounces several sentences in several different tongues. Tim clears his throat and answers with his own multi-lingual paragraph.

“What does he say?” I ask.

“Brilliant!” says Trito.

“He says he has witnessed the birth of a new nation here, and that he wishes to help parent it,” says Dekus.

“Better then to approach the women,” I say.

“Were I one I would,” says Tim.

“Gur, then,” I say.

“He does not hold Gur in high esteem,” says Trito.

“I respect Gur,” says Tim, “but I doubt his ability to father a nation.”

“He would help us draft a constitution,” says Trito.

“Yes,” says Tim.

“Okay,” I say.

Chapter Four

We are taking the draft of the constitution to the capitol.

It will resolve the conundrum of land ownership.

Halfway there from the confluence, we are waylaid by anti-labor guerillas and Tim saves my life.

Halfway further, we are ambushed by total outlaws, and I save his.

“You throw bombs!” Tim exclaims.

“Yes,” I say. “I have reinvented the grenade.”

Our carriage demolished, we proceed horseback. We are eleven. I, Tim, Dekus, and Trito, ride the drays who had drawn the carriage. Five of the other seven of my friends had already had steeds. Two take the dead outlaws' stallions.

Our arrival in the capitol is unheralded, and we announce ourselves to the watch as a foreign delegation.

We are shown to a suitable livery and inn. Before we have supped, Gur arrives.

“You should not be here!” I tell Gur.

“As if you should be” he says.

Gur's guard secures the whole sector of the capitol, and we spread the draft of the constitution, page by page, down the length of the bar. Guri and Anrea arrive and we all stand reading in a row. One of us will read a questionable passage out loud, and I will take notes on its revision. Other key players filter in and out. A scribe undertakes to rewrite the draft with my revisions. He works at a low table by the hearth.

Anrea takes me aside and interrogates me about Tim.

"He is our new nation's favorite uncle," I explain.

"Do you have people," Anrea asks Tim directly.

Tim laughs a charming laugh.

"Well, do you?" asks my mother.

"The nation of Thromba," Tim confesses, "is mine."

"You are the sovereign of Thrombia?" asks Gur.

"Aye," says Tim, then, to Anrea, "and I should like to court you."

"Somebody tell me about Thrombia!" says Gur, and falls into session with Trito and others.

"Court me instead!" bleats Guri, and is buffeted by Yuni's hand-fan.

"The revision is complete," announces the scribe from the fire.

We spread the pages again and recommence debate over who is to own the land.

"Lev's genius," says Tim, "is that though the land is owned privately, the natural resources are owned collectively."

"Collectively," I continue, "by every citizen."

"So when we sell a natural resource, or allot an amount of a resource to be put into production..." says Tim.

"Every citizen gets paid," I finish.

"Collective mineral rights," says Mother.

"That IS genius," says Guri.

"Doesn't solve the problem of who gets what property," grumbles Gur.

"That remains for us to decide, Father," says Mother.

"We've about got it licked," says Guri.

"We have the manifest," says Colia.

"Send for it," says Gur.

The manifest arrives, a carriage-load of loose-leaf paper detailing every known parcel of land in the nation and to whom its ownership is to be ceded.

“What use is having this document here?” I ask.

“It is ready,” says Gur. “This is as good a place as any. We will give it to the people.”

Working all together, we paper the walls of the inn with the manifest, saving space above the mantle for the constitution.

“Let them come,” says Gur, when we are done.

We leave what is now the most famous inn on the continent to go our separate ways. Tim leaves me for Anrea, for which I shall never forgive him. Dekus, Trito, and my friends remain in the capitol. Dana and I light out for the confluence. On the way, in a buggy, surrounded in escort by a full company of Gur’s guard, she tells me that she is pregnant.

Standing at the reins of the buggy, I shout the joyous news to our escorts. There is raucous congratulations, then a song. The guard sings about the birth of a first child. Dana and I weep.

Book III - Progeny

My son was born in Thromba, just after the wedding of Tim and Anrea.

Thromba is a modern nation, and we were not offered the option of eating the placenta.

“I would only eat a girl’s placenta anyway,” I said.

“It is just as well,” said Dana.

We lingered in Tim’s personal ward of the hospital in his capitol far longer than need be.

“I like it here,” said Dana. “It is very clean.”

“We will stay as long as you wish,” I told her.

As soon as we returned to our home nation, which had been christened Guria by its silly people, Dana set about converting big, clean houses into hospitals. Soon, Guria had more hospitals than patients, and we began to arrange for the import of foreign ill and wounded. Overseeing this enterprise, I grew gray-haired.

“Father,” said my son at age ten, “your work ages you prematurely.”

“I can still kick your ass,” I said.

“I want a sister,” said Levram, my son.

“Talk to your mother,” I said.

“Levram wants a sister,” Dana told me that night as she worked black dye into my hair with her fingers.

“How do we make a girl child?”

“Guri says we must conceive in the river by moonlight.”

“Hogwash.”

“Couldn’t hurt to try,” said Dana, so we returned that same month to the confluence, just the two of us with a sparse guard. Three men stood watch as we made love in the water.

“They’re making me nervous,” I said.

“Me, too,” said Dana.

“Go away!” I called to the men.

“No!” one replied.

I managed to get it up and off in my wife.

“Good work there Lev,” she said.

Nine months later, she had our daughter, Danae.

Danae grew up in hospitals. She was our country’s original candystriper. From the age of five, she sold snacks and goodies to patients across the nation. By the time she was a teenager, she employed Levram and a hundred other people and was independently wealthy. Levram kept her books.

“Danae has more money than Donus,” Levram told me.

“Donus plays too much dice,” I said.

My three uncles’ fortunes had suffered in the civil war. They still performed, but gone were the days when they received king’s ransoms to entertain the privileged. Florian was still rich, because his wife was well-connected and frugal, but Donus and Beatus lived pretty much gig to gig.

“Danae’s business netted more last year than Gur’s annual pay,” Levram told me.

“In what is she investing?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” said Levram.

“Danae, honey, your father wonders in what you are investing,” Dana said to her daughter.

“I buy the weaponry and effects of the foreign soldiers,” Danae said. “I am planning a museum.”

“But you make so much money, honey... how much can a few service weapons and uniforms cost?”

“I am also stockpiling and trading weapons in general,” said Danae. “The soldiers give me connections to their armories directly, and to various secondary suppliers.”

“Why?” said Dana.

“Weapons are like land,” said Danae. “They never truly depreciate, and one can almost always find a buyer.”

“But our business is to heal people.”

“Customers are good for business,” said Danae.

As it turned out, Danae was supplying both sides of several international skirmishes. She was not yet of marrying age. Levram, too, was a major arms dealer. My wife and I were proud and mortified.

Guri died. Yuni killed herself. Gur passed the presidency to my old patron, Dekus, which surprised me very much, as I had lost contact with him and failed to follow his career. When Anrea and Tim arrived for the double funeral, Tim begged audience with my children, and I sat in on a surreal tete-a-tete wherein the fates of a few small nations hung in the balance. By the end of the session, Danae and Levram owned a vault of currencies and gold in Thromba.

The funeral was long. It was attended, it seemed, by the whole nation. The capitol was gridlocked. Dana and I had to get away. Work called; there were patients to place and hospitals to audit for me, and Dana was honorary managerial nursing staff in every direction across the map. But we absconded with ourselves to Thromba, to be with Mother and Tim. Danae and Levram came along. Their stockpiles, they said, were spent. Danae left behind a military museum, as she'd said she would.

In Thromba, I joined Tim in international affairs, molding the affairs of many nations and protecting always the security and interests of Guria. The next time I went home was for the passing of my father. Again Guria mourned. My uncles performed at their father's wake. Anrea took Colia with us back to Thromba.

Anato died, as did his brother Alex the ringmaster. Noc was next. It seemed everyone was dying.

I voyaged alone to Noc's hospital deathbed.

"Hello, Noc," I said.

"Noc is dead. Long live Noc," Noc said.

"Amen," said Noc's son Noc, and left the two of us alone in the room.

"You know what we still don't have?" rasped Noc.

"What?" I asked.

"A flag," said Noc. "The Gurian flag."

"I'll see to it," I said.

"Thank you," said Noc, and died.

Conceptually, the flag was beyond me or anyone I knew. Tim just shrugged wordlessly when I asked for advice.

"Go find it," said Mother.

"I'll help," said Dana.

So we left our children with Colia in Thromba and traveled Guria at random with just a pair of guards, staying in inns, attending town meetings and visiting libraries and museums and schools. Every town had a few ideas about what the Gurian flag could look like. We decided to put the question to the youth. So we created a book about the flags of many nations and what they symbolized, and ended it with a chapter of history on Guria. We gave the book to every school we could find, and fine-tuned national funding of education in the process. It took us years, but in the end, we found our flag in an essay contest. The winner of the essay contest suggested a meaningful color scheme and a few symbols, to which I added only one: a long, straight line across the bottom of the design, which to me represented a boatman's pole.

The Gurian flag was red for the blood that had run in the revolution, and green and yellow and blue for our forests, fields, and waterways. At its center was a basket, around which was a circle of disembodied hands reaching for the basket. Along the bottom was my pole.

The nation declared an annual holiday celebrating the date on which it adopted its flag. The holiday was officially designated Flag Day, but everyone called it Lev's Day. I have made sure to be somewhere in Guria every Lev's Day for all the subsequent years of my life, which now takes most of the fingers and toes of all three of my uncles' second wives to count. Those three, as it turns out, are the comfort of my old age. They summer in the bigtop in the meadow while their husbands tour wide and far, and I live most late springs, summers, and early autumns, in the cave-houses with sundry family and friends.

One of the caves is my laboratory, where I developed the bomb which devastated the capitol and the grenades I still carry to this day. I haven't had occasion to use the grenades except once when Tim took me hunting in Thromba and I exploded a few forest creatures. I want very badly to lob one into the river, but I have been warned by the local fisherman that if I ever do, I will be evicted.

Another of the caves is the dormitory. All told, it sleeps a dozen comfortably and double that in a pinch.

Then there is the smaller central cave-house, where I proposed to Dana. I sleep there by the pool in furs, as Guri did. Dana joins me there often when not off working, and these days, she helps me move my desk.

Levram and Danae have inherited most of the city holdings of Gur through Colia. Levram lives in the house of books where he was conceived. Danae has another small house nearby. Neither has married, which is just a sad testament to the fact that their matchmaking grandmother is no more.

Dana came home to me one summer day excited by her own news.

"There are scientists in Thromba who propose to determine ancestry by physical examination," she said.

"So?" I said.

"They might tell you something about your parentage," she said more shyly.

"Okay," I said.

That early autumn, Dana brought three nurses, one of whom was male, to examine me in my cave-house.

They measured and cut and bled me, and took a great dose of my sputum away in a jar.

"Surprised they didn't want some semen," I said in earnest to my wife once they were gone.

"I think that male nurse may have wanted a dose," Dana replied. "The sputum is the key," she went on to explain. "We need our scientists to learn this new methodology. I'm sending doctors to Thromba, but it's scientists we need."

"What's so needful about reading sputum to determine ancestry?" I asked.

"Within the sputum is a kind of code, the language in which our bodies are written," said Dana.

"Far out," I said.

"If we can read this code and even write it, then a brighter medical future will be upon us."

"I'll help," I said.

Dana and I went back to the schools. We enhanced science curricula and funded incentives for science students. Meanwhile, we held summits of prevalent professors and doctors and laboratory technicians.

After an interminable wait, I received the results of my spit-test. My people had come to pre-Guria from a country which bordered Thromba. I traveled there and met people who looked like me. I convinced my uncle Florian and his children to spit in a jar and his whole line turned up pre-Guria born.

I researched old registries to find families who had moved from my nation of origin to pre-Guria. The registries contained only land owners' families. If my parents had been workers, my search was futile. But I persevered, and as I narrowed my search, moving from registries to family papers, I honed in on a few promising accounts of privileged daughters' unwanted pregnancies. Finally I found the journal of a land owner who lamented his daughter "abandoning my heir at a library."

"My God, Lev, you've found her," wept Dana when I showed her the journal.

I turned to the manifest, which was still at the famous inn in the capitol, and found my grandfather on the roster being ceded a certain chunk of countryside. His daughter's name did not appear.

Gathering my family in a comfortable carriage, I strapped on my grenades and rode to meet my makers.

"Why do you always have to wear those bombs?" Levram asked.

I did not deign to respond.

"What if one of them goes off?" asked Danae.

I did not deign to respond.

"The kids are right, Lev, you are insane," said Dana.

"Yes, dear," I responded.

Like most of the new estates, my grandfather's land was tenanted by all manner of workers, making it into a large community. The main residence was not walled or even gated, and we rolled right up to near the front porch, upon which sat several people. A woman was in the process of grooming a horse in the drive in front of the porch, so we pulled up short and piled out of the carriage.

"Welcome!" called the man who was likely my grandfather from the porch.

I went to the woman grooming the horse.

"Are you his daughter?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"I believe I am your son," I said to her. "I was found at age one at a library in the city."

The woman put down her curry comb with a trembling hand and looked me up and down. We knew. She offered an embrace and I accepted.

"Are these... weapons?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

My grandfather stood talking with Danae and the children.

"Your father..." began my mother.

"A worker?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"A first cousin," said my grandfather, coming up to place a hand on my shoulder.

"Great," I said. "Where is he now? Dead?"

"He lives in Urhut," said my grandfather, naming Thrumba's neighbor-nation which I had visited.

"My son... Lev..." said my mother. "Lev's Day Lev."

For no reason, I let out a Beatus-laugh.

"Will you come with me to meet my father?" I asked my mother.

"If you wish it," she said.

"Would you want to?" I asked.

"No," she answered.

But I made her come. And her father came too. And Dana and Danae and Levram. My father was wealthy, his castle-like mansion gated, walled, and moated. He received us personally in the courtyard within the gate. He looked like me and Levram.

"So why did you have sex with your first cousin," Levram asked at the dinner table.

"Not while we're eating," protested Dana.

"It's fine," said my father.

"We were in love," my mother said.

"I still am," said my father.

"I am not," said my mother.

"This was a half a century ago," I told Levram.

"I know that," Levram said.

"Scientists currently believe..." Danae started to say, but was shushed by her mother.

"Was incest common among the privileged back then?" asked Levram.

"Cousins sometimes married," said my father.

My grandfather choked quietly.

"You never proposed," said my mother.

"You did not want me to," said my father.

"No," coughed my grandfather.

“Scientist currently believe,” Danae said again, “That incest favors recessive traits to a fault.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means we’re freaks,” said Levram.

“Father and Mother were cousins,” said my mother.

“Oh, great!” I said.

“Yes, two generations at least,” said my grandfather, “and likely more before that.”

“Really kept it in the family, haven’t we?” said Levram. “Well, what do you say, sis, want to make us a mutant?”

“Shut up, Levram,” said Danae.

“Come on,” said Levram, “we’ll procreate the quintessential family member and see if he has extra digits or what.”

“Shut up, Levram,” I said.

“You’ll be wanting,” said my father, “to see the library.”

On the way to the library, Dana held my arm tightly.

“Are you angry?” she asked.

“Only a little,” I replied.

The walls of the library were hung with portraits of me and Levram and my mother throughout the ages.

Under the portraits were shelves of journals and diaries. We were a literary people.

My family commenced to read. We read for weeks. We read aloud to each other. We ate while reading.

By the end of the month, we knew pretty much who we were, and I was ready to return to Guria. Lev’s Day was coming up and I didn’t want to miss being home for the holiday.

In parting, my father gave me a small heavy box and muttered that I should look after my mother.

I hefted the box in my palm and shook it gently.

“Don’t shake the diamonds, Lev,” said my mother.

Book IV – The Diamond Grenadier

Foreword

Since all the nation now knows I am inbred, I feel another piece of writing is warranted, if only as a case history. My children now hate me for revealing the family secret, though they love me still, notwithstanding. Among my current correspondence, which is as you may imagine massive, are many letters from other inbred people from here in Guria and abroad. I have up-to-date essays on the pertinent science, and I mail them out left and right. Dana has hired a local boy to take my outgoing parcels to the

put-in in a two-wheeled cart. The boatman complains that he is not a mailman. Our postal infrastructure needs attention. In fact, we need meaningful stamps as well. I'll see whether Danae might be interested.

Chapter 1

Some historians and critics have attributed my 'genius' to my recursive genetics.

I favor nurture over nature. If I have genius, it is Anrea's doing.

Anrea Queen of Thromba. Mother is coming to visit. She is to meet my biological mother for the first time.

Tim cannot come, he says. I am sad. He is more of a father to me than the diamond man in Urhut.

I used some of the diamonds to make one very special grenade, which is the only one I carry anymore.

Donus, Florian, and Beatus, who have to be the longest-running minstrel show in the world, arrive home from tour on the same boat as Anrea.

"Where is Colia?" I ask Anrea as I make her bed in the dormitory cave.

"Colia couldn't make it, dear. She has horrible cramps. Will this... will your mother come here?"

"This what? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"She has no claims to my affections," I lied.

"Of course she does. She is, by all reports, darling."

"But what were you going to say?"

"Just woman. This woman. But I thought it cold."

"She is pretty darling. You can't but like her."

"See? And that's perfectly fitting. I'm so glad that you like your mother."

"You are my mother."

"Of course I am. When does she come?"

"I expect her any day."

"And Dana and the kids? Where are they?"

"Dana is endowing science somewhere, Levram is searching for the person in the world to whom he is least related yet still sexually attracted, and Danae is in Thromba closing her vault."

"What will Danae do with her fortune?"

"Dunno. I am writing her now. I want her to see about the postal service and about getting us some meaningful stamps."

The return letter from Danae arrived in remarkably short order, before the arrival of my biological mother. Anrea and I had spent a nice couple of weeks with the family of Donus, Florian, and Beatus, and I had gotten some ideas down for stamps.

"Father," wrote Danae, "I'm sure Gurian postal service could use reform, but I am busy just now. Medicine is my new commodity. Already I have more drugs than Urhut." (Urhut was known for its spices and various other substances.) "I will be supplying Gurian hospitals," Danae continued, "as well as moving medicines directly to the people..." I read between the lines. She was also delving into recreational drugs. Already in Guria there were certain nuts to chew, certain powders to snuff. I was a naif about such things, so I quizzed my uncles.

"Well, we've had them all," said Beatus.

"In fact, we've got them all," said Donus.

"In quantity," said Florian.

They showed me to a root-cellar in the woods beyond the meadow, of which I had never known.

"This is called a stash," said Beatus.

"Have a seat," said Donus.

I sat in one of the root-cellar's three chairs. Donus and Beatus sat too, and Florian regarded their stash thoughtfully.

"You'd better take off your grenade," said Beatus.

"Good idea," agreed Donus.

"Okay."

"Just give it to me for now," said Florian. I handed it to him gingerly, and he placed it on a high shelf. Then, from a lower shelf, he picked a jug.

"This," Florian said, "is a stronger drink than you have ever consumed. It is unlike any other fluid we have found."

"What will it do to me?"

"It's pure speed," said Donus.

Florian placed the jug at my feet.

"Give him something to chew," said Beatus.

Florian fetched and handed me some roots.

"What do these do?" I asked.

"They give you waking dreams," said Donus.

"I'd rather try that powder that's so popular. What does it do?"

"This?" asked Florian, displaying a row of jars.

"I guess so."

"Garden-variety intoxication. Much like wine."

"What else is there?"

"A few things to smoke, several different pills, and the injectibles."

"Injectibles?!"

Florian showed me a sinister syringe. Beatus took off his shoe and sock and spread his toes to show me the tracks of multiple injections.

"Just give me some of the powder," I said.

"Probably wise," said Donus.

"Sure you don't want to smoke something?" asked Florian.

"I have never smoked anything in my life," I said.

I put a pinch of brown powder in the pocket of skin between my thumb and index finger, and snuffed it up into my nose. In a minute, I felt altered. I felt mindful of the moment and of enjoying the company of my uncles, who were one day to die on me.

"I love you guys," I said.

"We love you too, you inbred twit," said Beatus.

"You'll be wanting to catch up with Danae," I said.

"Why?" asked Florian.

"She has a copious... stash."

My palate was dirtied by the powder, and I took up the jug to cleanse it. One sip and I was talking incessantly. My uncles sipped, too, and we yammered at each other for an hour, delving into all the mysteries of the universe. Then we chewed the root, which shut us up. Florian sat on Beatus' lap and we all went into reveries.

"Florian," I said after the longest silence, "you should have your chair."

"Thank God," said Beatus.

"Thank you," said Florian.

Florian took his chair and I lay on the dank floor.

In my mind's eye, I saw the child of my children, of Levram and Danae. It was a mutant me, big-headed and short.

"Hello," said mutant-me.

"Hello," I said aloud.

"Hello," said Beatus, injecting something into his red-spotted toe-pits.

“What am I?” I asked mutant-me.

“High,” said Donus.

“You have abnormally many recessive traits,” said mutant-me.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means you’d better stay here with us a while,” said Florian.

“You know what it means,” said mutant-me. “It means certain rare characteristics appear in you.”

“Like what?”

“Huh?” said Beatus.

“What what?” asked Donus.

“He’s tripping,” said Florian.

“Like being a fucking genius,” said mutant-me.

“One is not A genius,” I protested; “One HAS genius, or moments of genius, or genius ideas, perhaps.”

“Well I’m a fucking genius,” said mutant-me.

And I carried on, conversing with mutant-me, for an hour or so, until second-hand contact with whatever my uncles were smoking altered me again and mutant-me faded away.

“Wow,” I said. “He’s gone.”

“He is?” asked Donus.

“You’ve had quite a trip,” said Florian.

Beatus appeared to be asleep.

“I think I’m ready to go home now,” I said.

“Okay,” said Donus.

“Okay,” said Florian. “Do you want your grenade?”

“That’s right,” I said. I had forgotten the diamond grenade even existed.

“What are you going to do with this?” asked Florian as he handed me back my munition.

“God only knows,” I replied, and took my leave.

When I’d stumbled blinking out of the woods, around the bigtop and down the lane to the cave-houses, I found my two mothers sitting in the front yard on either side of my desk, upon which they were taking tea.

“Tea, dear?” asked Anrea.

“Hello again,” said my mother, whose name was Mara.

“Hello, yes, thanks.” I plopped down beside them. There was already a cup for me, and Anrea filled it.

“Mara,” she said, “was just telling me about your trip to Urhut.”

“About how we read to each other,” said Mara.

“Nuture and narture,” I said over my cup.

“Lev is drunk,” said Anrea.

“Yes, and not on wine,” said Mara.

“Busted,” I said. Then thought of breasts and sipped more tea.

“Did you bring enough for the whole class, Lev?” Anrea’s tone was sharp.

“Oh, I’d never...” said Mara.

“Nor I,” said Anrea.

There was a pause.

“Danae, you see, has become a drug dealer,” I said.

“Did you receive something from her in the mail?” asked Anrea.

“Yes,” I lied, “a brown powder. I snuffed it all. Terrible stuff.”

“We must go find Danae,” said Mara.

“Yes,” said Anrea.

“Okay,” I said.

Tea concluded, we packed to travel abroad.

“Let’s not tell Dana yet,” I urged. “Levram probably knows.”

“We’ll start with him then. Maybe he knows where she is.”

Chapter 2

After long days of travel, we caught up with my son in a country of which none of us had heard, in bed with a woman who looked like she was from another planet.

“Wow,” I said.

“She’s pregnant,” said Levram.

“Let’s get you married then,” said Anrea.

“Not here,” said Levram.

“Why not?” asked Mara.

“The ritual here is... weird.”

“He must give me his front teeth,” said the woman.

“Okay, we’ll do the ceremony back home,” I said.

“I cannot leave without my siblings,” said the woman.

“Bring them along, by all means,” said Anrea.

“They are eight,” she said.

“Eight is fine,” I said, thinking of the dormitory cave.

So we gathered up Levram and his alien posse, and returned home for a quick wedding.

“Will Danae come?” asked Levram en route.

“We were hoping you’d know where she is,” said Anrea.

“Her stores are in Urhut,” Levram said.

“I’ll fetch her,” said Mara, and took a different boat from us at the next stop.

“I must see Tim,” Anrea said as we reached the border of Thromba.

“Let’s do it here, the wedding,” said Levram.

With admirable swiftness, after we announced ourselves to the border patrol, Tim himself arrived. He greeted the nine aliens with charm and formality, and suggested hosting the wedding before he could be asked to do so.

Everybody was hastily invited, and nobody could come.

Mara had located Danae and taken her to the confluence.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

“Okay,” said Levram.

“Colia, can you come?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll go there to die.”

“Try not to die AT the wedding, Grandmother,” said Levram.

“I’ll do my best not,” said Colia.

“Tim, can you come?”

“No. I’m at war.”

“Proper war?”

“Yes.”

“Are we at war, too?”

“Not yet.”

“Should we be?”

“Aye.”

“Okay.”

At the wedding, everybody but Anrea, Mara, Colia, and the bride and groom, was stoned on brown powder. Danae’s verve for it was positively infectious. My uncles and their wives were already on it, and soon, at least for that day, so were we all. It was a wedding without wine. Everyone was very in the moment and emotional. The eight siblings of the bride sang and danced, and my uncles joined in.

The next day, however, I strapped on my diamond grenade and went to the capitol to rattle sabers.

Tim’s enemy was formidable. We had precious little naval force.

“We need gunboats!” was my warcry.

“We need your daughter,” was the most common reply.

I sent for Danae and she dutifully appeared.

“We need gunboats!” I cried.

“No problem, Pop,” said Danae.

In days, she had traded her drugs for naval might for Guria.

Now we just had to learn to use it.

Under the guise of reforming the postal service, Danae and I papered the country with calls to arms.

“No conscription,” I declared, “but ruthless recruiting.”

“Merciless recruiting,” echoed my daughter.

Soon enough, we had a fledgling navy.

Danae and I volunteered and trained. I was an admiral, she a captain and gunner, which was unheard of.

Before we knew it, we were on the open sea, the foremost of our fleet already leaving safe waters.

I missed Danae and wondered whether I would ever see her again. But my ship was to remain flanked and shielded on all sides by other of our ships. That night, I heard cannons in the distance. We were at war.

Chapter 3

I am purchasing intelligence from pirates.

They know more about where everybody is on this God-forsaken wet than anyone else.

They rob me blind, but I know where to be.

The pirates know now about my personal munition, and they call me The Diamond Grenadier.

I am too old for some of this action, but some of the pirates are older. I met one octogenarian outlaw captain who offered me diamonds to make him a grenade. I was sorely tempted, because he had just saved half my fleet from destruction by alerting us timely to saboteurs amongst us. But I did not have a sufficient laboratory, really, not to myself anyway, so I had to suffice him with a promise to fulfill his wish in the future, should I live so long. The old pirate, who went by Durr, accepted my promise grudgingly and tried to pocket my own grenade off my stateroom shelf when I wasn't looking. I called him out, and he put it in my hand. I showed him the pin but not how to pull it. I told him to come to my homeplace the coming Lev's Day and to bring his diamonds. He somewhat painfully produced a pouch from within the crotch of his skin-tight leathern pants and poured from it diamonds upon his palm. Putting them back into the pouch, and the pouch back into his crotch, looked excruciating.

"Aye, that hurt," laughed Durr, as he allowed me to usher him off my ship.

One last push before a Lev's Day furlough. I maneuvered my fleet in amongst an archipelago in enemy territory and we proceeded to tear them apart. Before we were through, an admiral of Tim's found us and together we went on to decimate an important port. Tim's admiral occupied the port and the ground troops of our nations and four other allies were brought in. It was to be a land war now. I went home.

Durr arrived practically on my heels, and I sent Levram and his family away and gave Durr the dormitory cave. Within a week, he had filled all of its beds and a lot of its floor with pirates. Dana and Colia were terrified. They left to live with Levram in the city. My uncles sent their families to the city, but stayed on in the meadow themselves. Danae arrived with several sisters-in-arms of various rank and station.

"Wow, Pop, you made him a grenade?" she marveled.

"Aye," said Durr, and patted his diamond grenade where it hung near his armpit.

"Let's not pat our grenades," I said, without looking up from the letter I was composing on my desk.

"Who are you writing at the moment?" asked Danae.

"Your grandfather," I replied.

"Give King Tim my love," she said.

"We have all but taken our enemy's country," I averred.

"How is it to be... divided?" asked Danae.

"It is to be absorbed by its neighboring nations, from whom we will exact compensation."

"What will Guria get?"

"Three embassies and one base."

"Who will be our ambassadors? Better yet, who is to command the base?"

"You want it?"

"The base, yeah."

"It's yours."

"Shouldn't that be decided by Triton or somebody?"

“They don’t want even want ambassadorships. They’re scared.”

“So am I.”

“Fear is a valuable advisor,” said Durr.

“Danae my heart, could you and yours escort this pirate scum back to the port where they left their ships?”

“I’ve got what I come for,” allowed Durr.

“Sure, Pop,” said Danae, and she and her sisters-in-arms corralled the pirate contingent neatly and took them off the same afternoon. I sent with her my letter of recommendation slash appointment to the new base abroad. She kissed me on the cheek and told me not to spend too much time in the rootcellar.

“We’re going to miss those pirates,” said Florian.

“Those guys really know how to party,” said Donus.

Beatus laughed.

Chapter 4

Levram and my mothers and grandmother and his wife and her siblings came back.

The locals were scared shitless of Levram’s family, as, I’ll admit, were most of us.

The eight siblings pined and wasted away. There was precious little for them to do.

Levram’s wife explained that they just needed spouses. There wasn’t a man in the country besides my son brave enough to have one of them for a wife. Let alone a husband. So we had no choice but to send for mates for them from whence they had come. Levram’s resulting alien retinue overpopulated the confluence, so he took the whole queer brood to live with my biological grandfather and Mara. There, they became tenant farmers and herders and such, and I hear they’re getting along quite well.

My uncles and their families came and went, and only one of their children really took to me. This was a young man named Whit. Whit had a good eye for syntax, spelling, and word choice, and would proof and discuss each day’s writing with me. He also was strong enough to move my desk for me. I gave him the dormitory cave, and he brought no one with whom to share it.

So it was that Whit and I were caught up to the departure of the pirates in this manuscript when he finally confided in me that he wished to go and live in my library in the city. I sent him with my thanks and love and even came to visit him there before too long. I discovered him writing his own book about me. He was panicked that I would disapprove, but it was quite good, and as he finished his first draft, I made sure the right people saw his work-in-progress. He was swept up and celebrated, and the book soon saw print, and now I am even more damn famous than before.

“Why could you not have written about your fathers. I mean your father and his brothers.”

“I’ll do them next,” he said, and did. Another hit, and a shot-in-the-arm to my fading uncles’ career.

Whit introduced me to writers and critics as he found his legs in their world. I was surprised to find I liked the critics better than the writers.

“I may become a reviewer,” I told Whit.

“Reviewing what?” Whit asked.

“Everything,” I replied. “Maybe you’d better travel the world or something. I need my city digs, you see.”

He readily vacated my library, but took himself home instead of abroad. He lived and wrote in my old cave, found a local girl there he’d known all his life and in good time was married with children.

Meanwhile, my fame made everything I wrote saleable. The women of the family smiled warmly and left me to my devices, all except Dana, who insisted upon fairly regular conjugal visits.

I started with restaurants and did half the public dining halls in the city. Then I expanded my operations to encompass the theater, music, and books. My reviews were usually just a few informative paragraphs with a subjective judgement at the end, but I had the sensation of genuinely advancing Guria’s culture.

My byline was The Diamond Grenadier.

Word got to me somehow, by the way, that Durr had blown himself to smithereens.

Through diplomacy, Danae leveraged our base abroad into many bases abroad, in many countries. Where are we getting all these troops, I wondered, and looked into it. She was still recruiting mercilessly. I wrote to her to cut it out. We weren’t out to take over the world. She replied promptly that she would honor my wishes, and the flyers soon faded and tattered in the post offices. More boys and girls stayed home and made babies. There was a population boom, and as I sat writing my paragraphs in my dawning dotage, a large wave of new Gurian adults hit the city. They traveled abroad, too, especially where we had embassies and bases, and brought home foreign lovers and other tourists.

Tourism! The importance of this industry struck me, and I knew that it was to be my last real conquest.

I enlisted Whit’s aid, and together we compiled my tourist’s guide to Guria.

It had just become cost-effective to print pictures in books. Etchings, to be precise. So Dana got into that.

“Oh, love, you made these yourself?” This was my reaction to the etchings Dana contributed to the guide.

The guide was a smashing success.

“What now?” asked Dana. That night, both Colia and Beatus died – she of natural causes, and he of what he had too long been getting up to between his toes.

We went to the confluence to console the two remaining triplets and their families, and we stayed and stayed. Visitors came and went, sometimes just tourists, sometimes family or old friends.

Tim and Anrea arrived disguised along with their guard as a tour group. They, too, stayed and stayed. Tim had an heir from a previous marriage who had the helm of Thromba.

I helped my uncles write their last wills and testaments, and did mine while I was at it, bequeathing my grenade to Whit and dividing my holdings fairly equally among Danae and Levram, with the understanding that they would never let Dana want for anything. As if she did not have a fortune of her own.

A statue of me as an admiral was erected in the capitol, and another of me writing at my stone desk on a pond in the largest park in the city. I haven't seen them with my own eyes, but Dana has visited them and brought back etchings of them to show me. Her pictures bring tears to my eyes.

I've shown Whit how to work the pin.

Book V – An Afterword by the Editor

Damn right, I know how to work the pin, and it's on me at all times so govern yourself accordingly.

Lev's passing was remarkably unremarkable, given the life he lived. He died asleep in his furs by the pool, with Dana by his side. I was the one who found her preparing to explode herself but unable to activate her husband's device.

"Hey now, that's mine," I said grumpily and snatched it from her.

She also tried to drown herself in the moonlight in the river, but we caught her at that, too, and sent her to bed with Beatus' widow. They hit it off, and now share one of the smaller tents in the bigtop's meadow.

My wife and kids and I have taken over two of the cave-houses: old Gur's and the dormitory. We've preserved Lev's laboratory as he left it and show it and his desk in the front yard to tourists for money.

Florian and Donus and their wives and some of their kids and grandkids all inhabit the bigtop and other meadow tents.

At the moment, I am in a carriage on the way to introduce my children to Levram's children.

Danae is to be there as well, which is huge, because she is as busy as ever. I understand she is high up in the military intelligence end of things.

"Father, what will we DO there?" asks my son for the fourteenth time.

"You will play, he's said," says my wife chidingly.

"Old Lev said they were a-li-ens," says my daughter in an annoying sing-song.

"Well, maybe they are," I grunt gruffly in response.

And I write this bit more, and now we arrive. By God, if they're not aliens, they're something else.

Levram and his family have won us over. The kids play happily, and seem to enjoy even moreso the tutelage of their variously educated caregivers. There is a musical tutor/nanny. There is a literary scholar/tutor who also handles history and world cultures. There are those who teach horsemanship and all manner of farmwork. There is even a maths and sciences tutor. And it is he I believe they like the best.

My wife and I want this sprawling, haphazard school for our children. I believe we may stay on.

Danae has come and gone. She and I made a point of spending some time together, and she whooped me but good in several sports and games during her stay.

We were playing horseshoes one morning after breakfast, and I had a brilliant idea.

“You know, cousin,” I said, “this same game could be played under water.”

She considered, and a peculiar look came onto her face.

“You know, cousin,” she said, “you’re right!”

“If only the pond were clear.”

“And we had long breathing straws and weighted belts.”

That evening she departed for the capitol. From the seat of her buggy, she handed me a note. I pocketed it for all of five minutes, until she was out of sight, then tore it open and read:

“Come to the capitol this Lev’s Day,” it read, “and meanwhile practice holding your breath.”

I have practiced these slow months since that day, and now I am ready. I leave alone tomorrow.

Near the statue of Admiral Lev in the capitol is an outdoor pool of deep, clear water. Surrounding this pool are many people peering down and into the water. Standing on the bottom of the pool, our heads feet below the surface, my cousin and I pitch horseshoes. She wins, of course. The crowd claps sedately.

“Whit,” Danae said to me after the match, “we might need you.”

“For what?” I asked, “And who’s we?”

“By we, I mean the secret service, and for what remains to be seen.”

“I am but a writer,” I averred.

“There is more writing in my line of work than you might suspect,” said my cousin.

“Like what kind of writing?”

“Cases, dossiers...”

“I don’t know that I’d make a good spy.”

“Well, with that grenade on you all the time, we could hardly send you undercover. I was thinking more of you proofing and analyzing the reports of field agents.”

“Like you.”

“Well, I am technically military intelligence, and my name and face are known worldwide. You would be working the reports of secret service agents. Both domestic and abroad. You could do it from home, you know. From my brother’s or wherever. Think about it. Let me know. Sometimes it feels good to serve your country.”

A week later, by letter from Levram’s grandfather’s estate, I accepted the position of secret service agent.

Levram's grandfather died just as I undertook my first boxes of reports. He left the estate to Mara, of course, and she proposed to change practically nothing. I was given the den of the deceased in which to work, one whole wall of which was the door of an empty vault, perfect for storing my work securely.

I worked and worked, and the boxes kept coming. When I had a decent dossier or case summary put together, I mailed it off to my control. Eventually, when I made a connection which mattered immediately, I was authorized to address it down the pipeline to the agent or agents most concerned.

With the data from multiple agents at my disposal, I could triangulate on leads. My intel began to solve cases. There were others like me, but my dossiers were preferred. Control let me know that the buzzword was I could really get in the heads of the people I studied.

I received a visit from Anrea and Tim. They came and sat with me in the den.

"Whit," said Anrea, "you know Guria and Thromba are allied through and through."

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," said Tim, and leaned forward to pass me an exquisite envelope, exquisitely sealed.

"Shall I open this now?" I asked.

"Sure," said Anrea.

I used a knife to preserve the seal, and unfolded and flattened the single thick page on my desk before me. What I read made my skin crawl. I was to receive reports from the secret service agents of a half-dozen nations.

"I... I won't have room..." I stammered.

"We're here to give you options," said my aunt. "A wing in a capitol building here in Guria. Your own building in Thromba. Other options abroad. You are wanted everywhere, yet nobody but agents know your function. So far. We feel Thromba is where we can protect you best, given the likelihood that you will eventually come to be known to enemy states."

"My family?"

"We suspect they're best off here," said Anrea.

"I'll miss them."

"You'll visit."

"Okay?"

"Yes? Thromba?" asked Tim.

"Yes," I said. "Thromba."

It was decided I should not travel with Anrea and Tim, who were again disguised as tourists.

I took next to nothing with me, merely sending instructions on opening the vault to my control.

I went as myself, passing first by the confluence, then by the city, then through the capitol, and finally over to Thromba. My building was already staffed and waiting. I just found the address, signed in at the lobby desk, and climbed the stair to my top-floor office and living quarters. Within the hour, I was giving orders. I had most of the walls of the floor below me removed and the boxes from the basement brought up and stacked according to their country of origin and recentness. This took a few days, during which time I interviewed all personnel under my direction and assigned them duties. Most would sort, some would take dictation, a few would transcribe and compile. Then there was the postal staff. I did not envy them their jobs. I also had a few personal staff to maintain my quarters and see to my needs.

The head of my household staff was a man, and he had two women under him. One of the women cleaned, and the other cooked. The man proposed to dress me, but I politely declined. He was a bored and boring man, and I did not keep him long. As for the women, I was glad they were not attractive.

I got to work.

Lev was known for publishing books he shouldn't. He ratted out Gur for the murder of Tuc. He confessed to springing Gur from prison, and to spearheading the rebellion and ensuing civil war even as it occurred. He wrote about tripping on crazy drugs, and he told the world that he and his line were the product of inbreeding. Well, here I am carrying on in his great tradition. I am writing state secrets. A book which must never see the light of day. Futile? Perhaps. Irresistible? Certainly.

The first case I cracked from Thromba was an international drug cartel. I leaned heavily upon correspondence with Danae for that one. Next, I spotted connections among a number of ongoing field reports from various agents in a particular so-called ally state. When those agents received my assessment and suggested courses of action, they uncovered a coup in progress which included intent to attack both Thromba and Guria. I had prevented invasion. I was earning my keep.

All the while, I worked on dossiers of the agents who reported to me. I passed suspicions of a few of them up the chain of command and two were unmasked as double agents.

I prevented an assassination attempt on Tim and Anrea. They came to my building personally to thank me for that, but I did not let them past the lobby.

I kept agents alive and nations allied. I uprooted embezzlement of the Gurian treasury.

Guria, I learned, was the talk of the world because of Lev's genius idea: deprivatization of natural resources. Most countries were alarmed and threatened by the success of this practice. A few endeavored to implement it for themselves, without success. It seemed it could not be instituted without the bloodbath. There was talk of Guria's economy surpassing those of long-standing, wealthy states. People were choosing Guria as a place to do business, a place to convalesce, a place to emigrate and raise families.

Guria was experiencing increasing population density. Would it seek to expand its borders?

I ran and ran my dossiers of Gurian politicians. There were those who did advocate imperialist approaches to foreign affairs. Like Danae masterminding the proliferation of Gurian bases, these political leaders leapt at every chance to enhance Gurian influence and presence in the world at large.

It became clear to me that without intervention, Guria would soon outgrow its britches.

The problem of course was that Guria was a democracy, and the leaders in question were quite fairly elected and supported by their constituencies. One could hardly commence the ouster of the people's choices without undermining the integrity of the whole system of government.

I went to see Uncle Tim, King of Thromba.

"What's on your mind, Whit?"

"Preservation of the Gurian way of life."

"Yes? I'm with you."

"Guria is a worldwide curiosity and has become a powderkeg."

"Yes. I can barely keep us allied."

"Guria faces imminent attack, and there is only one way I can see to save it."

"How?"

"You attack."

"Thromba attack Guria?"

"Indeed. Thromba consume Guria"

"You've lost me."

"Your navy must stomp and curtail our navy. Your army must invade and occupy our soil."

"To what end?"

"Only by seizing the reins of Guria and indeed consuming it can you keep it alive."

"How will I keep it alive if it all becomes Thromba?"

"Simply by leaving it intact in all but name."

"I cannot adopt Gurian democracy in Thromba."

"Tim, in your studies of other nations, have you come across much mention of 'reservations'?"

"As in of indigenous peoples?"

"Precisely."

"Messiah..."

"If Guria becomes a reservation surrounded by Thromban soil, it ceases to be a player in global politics."

"Whit, you have the genius of your family."

The war was brief, Thromba's victory decisive. Most of the exploded ships and boats had no one in them, and the invasion troops were nearly universally welcomed. I will never know the underground logistics of this: how the Gurian public were informed of and sold on my plan. Perhaps the ghost of Guri spread the

word, whispering in the ear of every Gurian at once. That's how smoothly Guria became a reservation surrounded by Thromban soil. Realizing that I had trained enough of my staff to do my work without me, and that I would never top my most recent success as a secret agent, I retired to the res and opened a casino. Tim objected, but I made him know that this was the done thing the world over, and he had no say in it. Mine was the only casino in the world with croupiers of the extraction of Levram's children.

They are beautiful, Levram's kids. Everybody thinks so. And everytime you take one home, you wind up with several more somehow, which then win the neighbors and so on and so forth. The country they were from has long since succumbed to tribal warfare and the rape of nature and has been colonized and disbanded. Where did their refugees go? Guria. Where once their miens struck fear, now they were family.

Thromba remains Thromba, and Guria remains Guria, but the world has turned its eye from both. No more Gurian bases abroad, or at all. Unless you count the confluence, which has come to be armed to the teeth.

Tim's son has sought me out at my office below the casino to ask me point blank what is going on at the confluence, so I suppose I must go and find out. It is to be my first real field duty. I hope it goes okay.

Getting there isn't easy, even for a native son like me. None of the boatmen seem to have heard of it, so I buy a boat and pole and bloody go there by hand. On the way, I pick up one passenger: a drunken, drowning monk. Yes, there are monks now in Guria. There's a newish religion. They say the messiah is come. This monk was right in my path in the river, flailing ineffectually and with flagging strength in his thick, voluminous robe. I gave him the end of my pole and guided him into my boat without overturning. He lay gasping until he lost consciousness. Meanwhile, we arrived at the most familiar of put-ins.

It occurred to me to undress the monk and assume his identity. This I undertook, only to find under his robe several forms of weapon, including garrote, blade, and firearm. I strapped them all on and the sodden robe, reassured myself that my grenade was secure and dry in its accustomed place, and squelched in wet shoes up the lane to Old Gur's cave-house. The cave-houses were walled high around and sealed by a wicked gate with two guard towers.

"Who goes?" came a hushed call, for it was the dead of night.

"Just a monk," I replied in the same low tone.

I heard snickers and the gate creaked open.

I walked in with my head bowed and my hands clasped behind me.

In the yard, I saw Lev's desk. Upon it a pile of fruit.

I made straight for the privy.

I actually did avail myself of the privy, and for some time to be honest, before emerging and approaching the cave-houses. I chose the laboratory cave, which I had reason to suspect the least likely to be occupied.

I was wrong. The laboratory was occupied. By Florian, Donus, and another, a Levram-kid.

"Well, hello, family," I said, throwing back my hood.

"Whit!" cried Florian and Donus as one.

"Cousin Whit?" queried the Levram-kid, "you're a monk?"

“No, cousin,” I admitted, and shed the great wet robe.

“Whit,” said Donus, “this here’s the messiah.”

“The messiah,” echoed Florian.

“You are?” I asked.

“I am,” said the Levram-kid with a shrug.

“Why is the messiah playing dice with two of the filthiest men on the planet?”

“I need some traveling cash,” said the messiah.

“Where will you travel?”

“To the homeplace of my mother’s people.”

“Why go there? It is changed... gone.”

“Only there will the will of God be clear to me.”

“That’s... rough... well... I’ll take you.”

“Okay,” said the messiah.

We got him up in the robe with all the weaponry and I led the three of them back to the meadow, where Donus and Florian announced themselves to another guarded gate, and introduced me as family, and we went in. Donus and Florian made for a small tent.

“Y’all don’t sleep in the bigtop?”

“Nah,” said Donus. “It’s full of monks.”

“What do the monks want?”

“To protect the messiah.”

“May we go?” asked the messiah.

“One errand first,” I said. “You stay here just a moment.”

I took the path to the root cellar and fetched the jug of speed.

“I know what that is,” said the messiah.

“I do too,” I said, taking a swig.

In fast motion we were out the gate, down the lane, into the boat, and out of the whole region.

“Wow,” said the messiah, “that stuff really works.”

“It does,” I said, and took another swig.

Before I knew it, we were on a ship. Next we were galloping horseback. Finally we made our way by foot and I found the jug was empty.

“We must be there,” I said.

“Just a little farther,” said the messiah.

Directly, I collapsed.

“You go on, cousin,” I gasped. “I must sleep.”

“Good night, cousin, thank you and sweet dreams.”

When I awoke, I was in the back of a wagon, hogtied. I could feel my grenade pressing into my ribs beneath the ropes. There was no one else in the bed of the wagon, and I could not see who drove.

I awoke again to a bucket of cold water in my face. My hands were free. I clutched the diamond grenade and pulled the pin. Men lunged for me, but I ducked and ran out the door.

“Get him!” I heard. Then the explosion. Then silence.

I was in the front room of a small shack. The wagon was waiting out front. Without looking back, I exited the shack, hopped in the wagon, and followed its tracks back toward wherever it had found me.

After a number of hours of riding, I came upon the messiah walking along, still in the monk’s habit.

“Cousin!” exclaimed the messiah. “You have found us a wagon.”

“Aye,” I said, “And where to now?”

“Oh I don’t know, anywhere I guess.”

“Has the will of God become clear to you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what is it?”

“God wants for me to die here.”

“Here?”

“In this world.”

“Like, soon?”

“Pretty soon.”

“Well how do you like that?”

“I like it okay.”

“Okay.”

I took us back to Guria.

Well, almost. We were just about to step onto the res when Tim's son's men found and apprehended us.

"You are sent for, sir," the man in charge told me.

"Very well, but please allow my cousin here to accompany me."

"Most assuredly, sir."

And off we went.

Soon, in an interrogation room under a building near the building which had used to be mine, Tim's son grilled me. I told him everything.

"Well we're not killing him!" was his ultimate response.

"Well, who will, then?" asked the messiah.

"Hell if I know. Mess... Lordy. Just get him out of here, will you? Wait – what are we supposed to do? We... mortals?"

"Believe in me and kill me and then believe in me some more."

"Great. Just get out."

"Well, cousin," I said, "you want a job?"

"Yes," said the messiah.

He made a great croupier. He got good tips. Word got around that he called himself the messiah, and lots of people came to check him out, which was great for business. Eventually, he developed a small group of true-believers amongst the gambling set, and a few of them were always around him. Some monks showed up, but could not get into the casino because they would not relinquish their arsenals.

Next I knew, he was shaking my hand and thanking me and turning in his uniform.

"Where will you go?" I asked him.

"To my death," he shrugged.

"I believe in you," I said.

"There you go," he said, and left.

It was one of the monks that slew him, so I heard. As he attempted to regain Old Gur's cave-house.

A few of his friends have come to me, wanting me to write down their stories of him.

I guess I'll try my hand.

The End

By

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September, 2015